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**Edited by
Sebastian Painadath**

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Initiatives of Inter-religious Dialogue in India

Part II

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Editorial

A report of the experiments and experiences in the field of inter-religious dialogue in India was published in the September 2007 issue of *Jeevadhara*. It made the readers acquainted with several significant Catholic initiatives of inter-religious dialogue in response to the living diversity of religions. A few more reports came in after the publication of the journal; several readers were enquiring about further initiatives of dialogue, especially in relation to Muslims. Dialogue between Christians and Muslims demands special urgency in today's divided world. Indian art forms offer a creative area for inter-religious communication.

Inter-religious dialogue can also touch on sensitive issues. The communal tensions caused by inbuilt prejudices, political manipulations and fundamentalist attitudes have to be addressed. Those who are courageously getting involved with these issues especially in sensitive areas like Varanasi, Gujarat, Goa and Bengal tell their stories of struggle and reconciliation.

At the outset there is a description of the work of the CBCI Commission for Religious Harmony. At the end there is an account of the *Khrist Bhakta Movement* of Varanasi. The latter needs special attention. Inter-religious dialogue does not mean bracketing out one's faith experience, rather sharing one's authentic faith in a credible and non-aggressive way with the other, and openness to be enriched by the spiritual experience of the other. The *Khrist Bhakta Movement* evolves on the lines of the age old Indian bhakti movement. This phenomenon does raise a lot of theological and cultural questions, but it needs to be taken note of.

Several of those to speak about their engagement in dialogue start with a note on their personal biography. This makes their story more credible. They entered the scene of inter-religious dialogue with an inner enthusiasm. May these reports on the Catholic initiatives of inter-religious dialogue inspire many more to enter upon the path of dialogue that leads to a much needed culture of inter-faith harmony in India. It is to be hoped that these experiments and experiences of the Indian Christians would enrich the universal Church in its search for an authentic way of Christian witness in a world of religious pluralism.

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Efforts to Keep Harmony among Religious Communities

M.D. Thomas

CBCI is the apex body of the Catholic Church in India. M. D. Thomas, the National Secretary of the CBCI Commission for Religious Harmony offers a detailed description of the structure and functioning of the Commission in promoting and coordinating the initiatives of inter-religious dialogue in India.

The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi

The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi, is the official organization of the Catholic Christian community in India for promoting good relations with other religious communities and social groups. It is deeply committed to making a more harmonious society through walking and working together in life with people of all faiths and ideologies. The Commission takes care of relations with other faith communities (inter-religious dialogue) as well as with other Christian denominations (ecumenism).

The name of the Commission in the beginning was 'Commission for Dialogue with other religions and with Non-Believers' in 1966. The Commission was renamed 'Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue' in 1975. The name was further changed into 'Commission for Dialogue and National Desk for Ecumenism' in 2002. The name 'Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue' and 'Commission for Inter-Faith Dialogue' were used informally since 1994. The name 'National

Commission for Religious Harmony' has been used for external purposes with the informal consent of the Commission officials and in line with the consensus of the National Consultation of the Commission, 2005. The relation with other Christians and the relations with other faith communities are taken care of by the present name of the Commission. The present name is in the process of being officially approved by the CBCI.

Historical Development of the Commission

The 'Commission for Dialogue with other religions and with Non-Believers' was created in 1966. It had a full time Secretary/Director for the first time in January 1973. It had some other concerns also like evangelization, proclamation and communication then. Over the years the Commission gained experience and thus received clarity of concept, focus and autonomy. Today its main concern is 'dialogue with other faith communities'. It has attained a broader perspective as 'promoting harmony among faith communities'.

The concern of Ecumenism of the Catholic Church has a different arrangement since CBCI Meet in 2002. Three Commissions for Ecumenism were setup for Latin (CCBI), Syro Malabar (SMBS) and Syro Malankara (SMBS) Churches. They are responsible for the details of the ecumenical activities in the country. The National Desk for Ecumenism is responsible for only four areas: 1. Coordinating the ecumenical activities of the above three Churches, 2. Collaborating with other Christian bodies like NCCI and EFI, 3. Taking up national issues related to the Christian community, 4. Representing the country outside India on matters of Christian unity.

The National office of the Commission is situated at CBCI Centre, New Delhi. The office is equipped with the necessary furniture and staff. The assets, documents and files are systematically maintained, too. The chief executive office has a display of pictures of founders and places of worship of all religions and traditions, as a symbolic gesture of good will and respect for all faith traditions. The office has a catalogue of books, periodicals as well as other reports and documents of the Commission.

Networking of the Commission

The international office of the Commission is 'Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, Rome'. The 'Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs, FABC', is the continental office. There is a 'South-Asia Harmony Forum' that is in the process for strengthening the South Asia networking. The national office of the Commission in India, obviously, is 'Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, New Delhi'.

The networking in India is organized at the following levels:

1. National Commission at the national level
2. Regional Commissions at the level of 13 regions (some regions are comprised of a cluster of states and others have in it just one state each)
3. Diocesan Commissions at the diocesan level
4. Congregational or Provincial Units at the level of the Religious Congregations: provinces or regions
5. Dialogue/ Harmony Institutes and Centres (most of them are established by Congregations and a few, by dioceses)
6. Harmony Forums (being launched at the national, regional, diocesan and city/town/district levels), Harmony Clubs (being launched at the level of schools and colleges) and Harmony Academies (being launched at the level of the major seminaries and major formation institutes)

The Organizational Structure

The office bearers of the Commission at the national level are the National Chairman, two National Members and the National Director (Secretary). There is a Regional Chairman and a Regional Director (Secretary) at the regional level. The Diocesan Chairman of the Commission is the local Bishop himself. There is a Diocesan Director at the diocesan level. There are Directors of the Dialogue/ Harmony Centres. There are also Coordinators for Religious Harmony/Inter-Religious Dialogue at the level of the Congregations/Provinces/Regions. The Directors or Coordinators at diverse levels are the executives of the Commission in India.

National Consultations are a yearly feature since 2003 and are organized by the National Commission. Regional Consultations as a rule are organized on a half-yearly basis. The National Commission conducted one round of Regional Consultations in all twelve regions in 2004. The Regional Director organizes the Regional Consultations in consultation with the National Director. The National Director participates in the same minimum once a year in all the regions. He is by and large part of all the regional programmes in the capacity of a resource person. He conducts seminars for different groups in dioceses also, as per request and visits the Dialogue/Harmony Centres of the country and participates in programmes organized there.

The Commission facilitated the appointment of Regional Directors from 7 to 12 regions in 2004. It followed up the appointment of Diocesan Directors from 36 to 82 % in 2004 and updated the list of Diocesan Directors through a survey in 2003. Because of transfers, change of the Directors at the level of the regions, dioceses and centres is a part of the process. Initiatives of both regional and diocesan Directors are highly encouraged. The regional and local contexts, problems and concerns are taken in to consideration in planning and conducting the programmes of the dialogue and harmony. Facilitating the regions to develop a regional perspective of the mission is increasingly a leading point of reference.

Publication of Guidelines from the Commission

The Commission published 'Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue' in 1977. These Guidelines were revised and published in 1989. The Commission also published 'Guidelines for Ecumenism' in 2000. These 'Guidelines' elaborately describe the diverse dimensions of the inter-religious and inter-denominational mission respectively. Besides, the Commission released 'National Ecumenical Guidelines' in 2004, which was prepared in the National Ecumenical Consultation of CCBI, SMBS and SMBS Commissions for Ecumenism. This was intended for a better coordination of activities among the Ecclesial Bodies for Ecumenism and the National Desk for Ecumenism.

Orientations of the Mission of the Commission

Promoting awareness in the diverse sectors of the Catholic

community and empowering them for external relations is the primary concern of the Commission. Facilitating better understanding, collaboration and unity with people of other Christian denominations is the second area of focus. The details of this work are taken care of by the Ecclesial Commissions for Ecumenism. Networking with people of other faiths and ideologies through fostering creative interaction, better relations and joint action is the most important area of operation of the Commission. The first two areas remain to a great extent as preparatory for the third sphere. All the same, they are complementary to each other.

When the inter-religious mission was initiated by the Catholic Church, it was only a theological endeavor. Today theological exercise is a concern of only a small section of the Church. Dialogue today needs a multi-disciplinary perspective. Theory gives way to a practical approach in this area. Together with the search for deeper aspects in inter-religious dialogue, a multi-religious attitude has to be developed with its broader implications. The exercise of dialogue today has to be broadened from the religious campuses to non-religious and even secular circles. All perspectives are to be accommodated for making interaction effective. In fact, dialogue is not religion-centred; it is life-centred. Life is God's gift; religion is intended to facilitate it. A journey from paralleling to networking is the strongest inclination of the world today. Inter-religious dialogue has to proceed to a harmony of vision and mission, in view of including all dimensions of the reality of life and of imbibing their broader implications.

Broadening the Scope of the National Commission

The Commission has been making sustained efforts for broadening its horizons in concept, scope and outreach from 2003 onwards. The Commission constituted a 12-member National Consultative Committee in 2005 for more effective planning of its activities. The Committee meets off and on for the above purpose. The Commission organized a National Training Seminar for Regional and Diocesan Directors in two shifts in 2005 for technically equipping and empowering them.

The Commission formulated a Vision Statement for the first time in 2005. It reads as follows: 'The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, rooted in the values of Jesus and in response to the context of our times, envisions the emergence of a society, in which religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, ideological and other identities and traditions of India are accepted and promoted through creative interaction for the promotion of harmony and well being of all.'

The *panchsheel* (the five-dimensional concept and code of conduct) of the harmony mission is formulated as follows: *Sadbhaav* (good will), *Sambhaav* (equal footing), *Sammaan* (respect), *Sehyog* (co-operation) and *Samanvay* (harmony). Harmony is end result and goal of the mission and dialogue is the means and process of interaction, friendly relations and cooperation. It is a 'non-dominating style' of 'being present to the other', 'being a mirror to each other', 'walking together in life' and 'making a joint pilgrimage to God'. This is the vision and mission of harmony among faiths.

Formation of the Youth

The National Commission, in its National Consultation—2006, Bangalore, deliberated on the need of fostering awareness among the younger generation and on empowering them for the universal mission of promoting harmony in social life as well as among faith-based communities. This deliberation was intended for two sections of the younger generation, namely the religious youth in major seminaries and formation institutes and the secular youth in schools, colleges and universities. The Commission has evolved the following schemes in order to translate the above vision into a mission and has been in the process of implementing them.

The objective of the above schemes is 'eliciting a new leadership in the youth' through equipping them with awareness, motivation and commitment in the area of social and religious harmony. This, obviously, has to be one of the major concerns in the programme of education, especially today. Making a more harmonious society has to be the common motto of all faith-based communities and organizations. Fostering good will, understanding, friendly relations and collaboration among the different religious communities and social

groups is the way for realizing the above goal. The global and communal challenges of recent times call for innovative ways of networking the society beyond the scope of mere academic courses, as well. The schemes are the following.

1. Organizing joint academic programmes with universities for awareness building and motivation in universal values
2. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at major seminaries and formations institutes, with a proposal to launch 'harmony academies'
3. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at Departments of Religious Studies of Universities, with a proposal to take up field-based research of comparative nature
4. Delivering extension lectures to the staff and students at Colleges run by faith-based communities, secular foundations and government, with a proposal to launch 'harmony clubs'
5. Conducting motivational seminars for teachers of schools run by faith-based communities, secular foundations and government, with a proposal to launch 'harmony clubs'.
6. Addressing national organizations of educational, social and religious character, like Aiache, Ainacs, XBHE, AA, AICC and AICUF on harmony of religions and seeking their collaboration in making a better society

Some Regular Schemes of the National Commission

1. Visiting leading places of worship/ places of importance of other faith communities
2. Interacting with leaders of other religious communities
3. Organizing get-togethers of leaders of religious communities
4. Holding gatherings of people of different professional and ideological affiliations
5. Organizing sensitizing sessions for the general public in peaceful co-existence, collaboration and harmony
6. Forming Study circles of people of different affiliations

7. Networking, interacting and collaborating with like-minded organizations and NGOs of other communities
8. Making personal friendships with people of other communities
9. Initiating multi-lateral dialogue with leaders and individuals of organizations and communities of conflicting ideologies
10. Interacting with the new religious traditions and minor communities as well as with traditional and major religious and social traditions
11. Considering the perspectives and concerns of the common folk in the harmony vision
12. Attempting to take the mission of dialogue and harmony to the grass roots of the society
13. Coordinating the harmony efforts of the Regions, Dioceses, Seminaries, Centres, Institutes and Congregations/Provinces/Regions. Networking with the harmony efforts of other Christian communities and other religious organizations
14. Participating in the celebrations of the religious festivals of other communities
15. Sending greeting cards to individuals and organizations of other communities on the occasion of their festivals
16. Conducting good will visits to persons of other religious communities at festivals and important occasions
17. Welcoming dignitaries of other religious communities in the office of the Commission and holding friendly interactions with them
18. Organizing friendly get-together of leaders of religious communities, social movements and civil institutes at Christmas
19. Maintaining close friendships with people of other religious communities

Some Special Schemes of the National Commission

1. Composing and releasing an audio-CD album 'Samanvay-Dhaara' on multi-faith themes
2. Attending to communally disturbed situations in the country

3. Launching Harmony Forums at national, regional, diocesan, city/town/district levels
4. Giving interviews and messages on TV channels on 'harmony-related themes'
5. Giving interviews in print media on 'harmony-related themes'
6. Publishing articles in Books, Periodicals and News Papers on 'harmony themes'
7. Launching a Harmony Website of the Commission
8. Using art forms for promoting values of harmony in social life
9. Preparing a Book of Poems in Hindi on 'communal harmony', involving poets from all communities
10. Preparing a Book of Articles in English on 'harmony themes'
11. Preparing a Book of articles in Hindi on 'harmony themes'
12. Revising the Guidelines of the Commission
13. Organizing Multi-Faith Poetical Evening, involving poets from all faith communities
14. Organizing Multi-Faith Cultural Evening, involving students of schools run by different faith-based organizations
15. Motivating and involving more and more youth and women in the process of fostering harmony in social life
16. Initiating humanitarian activities on a joint basis with other faith communities
17. Initiating the national language 'Hindi' or the respective regional language in harmony programmes
18. Participating in and lecturing, both in Hindi and in English, at harmony programmes organized by institutes and organizations of other communities

The Multi-Faith Half-Yearly Journal 'Fellowship'

The Commission publishes a half-yearly journal 'Fellowship' for networking the religious and secular society and for disseminating the message of dialogue, harmony and fellowship. Fellowship is a unique journal of its own right in many respects, in the world of

journalism as well as in the world of CBCI publications. It contains views, reviews, interviews, news, poems, quotes, role models, readers' comments, greetings and special features that involve diverse religious traditions and social communities. It interacts with people of diverse faiths, ideologies, cultures, classes, castes and professions as well as of ethnic, religious and social backgrounds.

Started in 1994 as a News Bulletin with a circulation of 800 copies in 2003, *Fellowship* is a multi-colour journal with a circulation capacity of above 10,000 copies today. Its contents and renewed formatting reflect a broader concept and outlook, as well. It networks individuals and institutions of all communities and sectors in India and outside. It reaches the local, regional, national and international centers of all the religious communities, schools, colleges & universities of the country, social & cultural institutes and NGOs of the country, state & central government offices, embassies, political leaders & parties and leading libraries of the country.

The Commission is making sustained efforts in following up its initiative of making *Fellowship* a collaborative endeavour of well-meaning scholars and leaders from diverse religious communities by way of literary contributions. The journal is in the process of being made a joint venture of well-meaning citizens from all communities by way of financial contributions as well, rather than being entirely managed by one organization or community. 'Patrons of Fellowship', 'Sponsors of Fellowship', 'Friends of Fellowship' and 'Life Members of Fellowship' are the leading schemes of the journal 'Fellowship'. A 'Fellowship Get-together' of the literary and financial contributors of Fellowship and the collaborators of the harmony mission is visualized to be a yearly feature, too.

Similar Schemes are also designed for Regional and Diocesan Commissions.

The Vision

Promoting harmony in the diverse dimensions of social life is a real service to society. Facilitating faith-based organizations to collaborate towards such a social orientation justifies the very relevance of faith in life. Making a better society or making a more

harmonious society is the common mission of all faith-based organizations. Implications of the above harmony perspective of life would be getting creatively related to other communities while remaining rooted in one's own faith tradition.

Communities, especially faith-based communities, cannot exist today like islands. They cannot afford to travel on parallel lines without encountering one another. They have to join hands with each other to make the human society more worth living. The creation and all that is within it, especially the faith traditions, are the gift of the same Creator. They are the common cultural heritage of the human society. They shall not be defined as mine and yours. 'One mine in special and others also are mine in general'. This is the shared identity one has to grow towards, as individuals and faith-based organizations. Like the 'rainbow' integration and a spirit of 'complementariness' and 'togetherness' is the spiritual motto that will guide the destinies of the human society today and for the years to come. This is the sublime vision and noble mission the Commission for Religious harmony, CBCI, New Delhi, in diverse humble ways are deeply committed to.

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Indian Art Forms and Inter-religious Dialogue

Thomas D'Sa

As the Director of NBCLC, Bangalore, Thomas D'Sa introduced a new form of effective dialogue of cultures and religions: through dance and music. The harmony that becomes visible as artists of different religions dance together on religious themes embodies in a colourful form the emerging culture of the harmony of religions.

NBCLC, Bangalore

In response to the call given by the II Vatican Council to bring about renewal in the Church, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) set up the National Biblical, Catechetical & Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) in 1967 at Bangalore with four objectives: (i) commitment to social justice and struggle for liberation in view of creating a new society: free, just, human, fraternal, egalitarian, sharing and participatory; (ii) to realize the above through an all-round inter-religious dialogue and collaboration with people of all religions and ideologies; (iii) inculturation of all aspects of Christian life and of all activities of the Church; (iv) an authentic Indian Christian Spirituality to be developed, lived and promoted as a source and climax of the three other concerns. This will make the Church in India authentic and relevant.

1. NBCLC promoting Inter-religious Dialogue

The ministries of dialogue, inculturation and authentic Indian Christian Spirituality occupied the center stage, as they were oriented towards renewal in Bible, Catechetics and Liturgy according to the

context of our country. It began with the conviction that one experiences one's faith through one's culture like symbols, art, architecture, music, folklore etc.¹ In its 40th year, as NBCLC was celebrating its Ruby Jubilee, it felt the need of relaunching the mission by emphasizing on *retelling* the story of Jesus to the Indian cultures, to the Indian religions and to the socio-economic situation of the country. This was seen as a logical step forward after the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences organized the Asian Mission Congress with the theme 'Telling the Story of Jesus' to Asian cultures and religions. With this objective in mind NBCLC had formed a dance troupe called *Nrityavani* in 2001 to be in dialogue with Indian cultures and religions. Religions and cultures are inseparable. Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.² NBCLC believes that in every culture and religion there is some goodness and so is qualified with its innate values to accommodate the Gospel, give expression to its faith in worship.

2. *Nrityavani*: an Inspiration Coming from the Context

I have been working in North India all through my life except for the last 8 years. The Church in North India has been creative to face the new challenges that came particularly from religious militancy and fundamentalism. The ministry with people of other faiths became a necessity in order to be able to live in harmony and form communities of love. The conversion issue was negatively interpreted by various fundamentalist groups and their allies. Even the little ministry of dialogue was considered as another means of conversion. Though many attempts were made to bring the ministry to grass roots levels, it remained much with the intelligentsia and academicians. In the meantime smaller attempts were made to proclaim the Good News through the introduction of art forms. It found a very good place in the hearts of ordinary people, as well as some of the elite. Soon the

1 R. Panikkar, *Indic Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Inculturation*, in K. Pathil, *Religious Pluralism, an Indian Christian Perspective*, 252-99.

2 P. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1959, 42.

Bishops and Major Superiors of Northern Region were ready to give a strong and sure foundation for getting into Indian cultural art forms as a means of dialogue, inculturation and proclamation, by starting a Post-graduate College of Dance & Music at Varanasi. It was named *Nav Sadhana Kala Kendra*. Under the one banner of cultural art forms, people of all faiths came to it, of all ranks and social status. The poor but talented girls found job opportunities. The audiences grew larger and larger. Barriers were broken, bridges were built. The feelings that Christians are alienated from Indian culture were reduced. Christians found a better acceptance. We not only preserved our Indian cultural heritage but also promoted it. With a touch of the message of Christ we were able to venture into newer areas and inspire others to understand that while being genuinely the followers of Jesus, we can express our faith through the idiom of the people. When I came to NBCLC as its director, it was struggling with the idea of inculturation, as inculturation in other areas was not progressing. Hence, '*Nrityavani*' the present dance troupe was formed in 2001 to open a new door in the life of NBCLC to dialogue with the cultures, religions and the socio-economic situations of our country in an authentic but practical manner.

2.1. Dance Programmes of Nrityavani for Dialogue

The programmes of *Nrityavani* range from classical to folk, religious to social, Biblical to devotional, fusion to contemporary, Indian to western. We try to include the interests of as many groups as possible. Then according to the special interest of the group we recast the dance form. Our artists have to conceive and compose their own items, choreograph them keeping always the principle that there be a purpose and meaning for themselves and for the audience. They have to make even a dance-illiterate audience understand at least 60-70% of what they are communicating. Hence the troupe is named as *Nrityavani*. *Nritya* means dance, *vani* means voice. *Nrityavani* is supposed to be the voice of dance. Dance should communicate. Dance may be used for relaxation, to obtain peace, harmony and happiness. At the same time it must help us to reflect on our own life in the light of a divine message. Indian classical dance is divine by its

very nature and to communicate divine truths is naturally a source of joy.

Sacred Scriptures or Holy Writings are at the centre of our inspiration. Naturally Bible occupies the prime place, but we take inspiration from the Scriptures of other faiths as well. The Word of God should guide our life when we are confronted with new and different challenges of life. We try to depict how all Scriptures ultimately give us various shades of Truth, and how they agree on that one point. This has made us richer in our own understanding of Christian life. Having links with other Scriptures helps our audience to feel a sense of harmony with one another. Moreover our troupe members coming from different faiths including Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and tribal background feel that their Scriptures are respected by us Christians. That makes them love Christianity all the more. At times the prayer of Our Father is performed by people of different faiths, with costumes and colours unique to those faiths. When the audience sees this dialogue of faith, they are moved from within, as the medium itself becomes the message. This direction is very much in conformity with what the late Holy Father John Paul II had said “Ways must be developed to make this dialogue become a reality everywhere, but especially in Asia, the continent that is the cradle of ancient cultures and religions”³ We know from our experience that purely classical dance does not grip the attention of dance-illiterate audience for a long time, particularly that of the Christians. They need to be initiated into it. Hence we bring in a bit of drama to sustain the interest of everyone. If it is a 30-minute piece, then we bring in also folk dance styles and contemporary styles, so that in one non-stop dance-drama, the audience gets a little taste of everything. In this process there is a dialogue going on at various levels, at the level of religions, at the level of Scriptures, at the level of the rich and the poor, at the level of various cultural art forms, dialogue between folk and classical, simple and elite. Even in our folk dances like ‘*dandia*’ (dance with the beating of sticks) where Krishna dances with *gopis* (*beloved ones*), there is a message to say how close God is to us,

that he comes down and plays with his loving admirers. In our skilled dances like pot dance, *karagam*, Jesus is shown as 'living' water, as the waterpot is being balanced on the head. In the *tarangam*, plate dance, nine emotions of a human being are depicted, asking people to be fully human, respecting the *navarasas* (nine emotions or sentiments) so that they may grow into the fullness of their humanity. Then we depict the nine events from the life of Jesus showing that he was fully human and fully divine.

2.2. *Nrityavani creates New Symbols, Gestures and Finger-movements*

Classical dance is a language by itself. Most of the gestures and expressions used by us are universal. In all cultures joy is communicated by laughter, sorrow by tears, and anger by broadening the eyes. However finger movements called '*mudras*' are unique to Indian classical dance. These are found in a writing called '*Natya Shastra*' (doctrine of dance) which is considered as the fifth *Veda* because of its importance in helping the people to lead to God. When Christianity comes in contact with Indian culture, in order to give expression to its faith in an intelligible way, it needs to dialogue with Indian art forms. Our artists, well versed in dance, create their own *mudras* to give expression to our faith, e.g. finger and body movement to stand for the Holy Spirit, or to express the person of John the Baptist, in the act of baptizing, connection between Eucharist and washing of the feet. After having composed these with their ingenuity, they take them to a classical *guru* and seek his/her approval. Then this new concept is put in front of the elite and simple. After all these tests the new *mudras* are considered to be good for public use.

3. *Nrityavani's Performances in India and Abroad*

We perform an average of 82 programmes per year within the country. In the last 10 years our dance troupe has gone abroad 12 times, and an average of 44 performances has been done per year. Invariably there are requests from various quarters that we should return to the same place every second year, but with different programmes. We have wondered why. Our hosts have to spend such a lot of time, money and energy on organizing these tours. They do so gladly because I have seen that the response that they get from

various audiences gives them a lot of joy and a sense of fulfillment. At times, some people who have never seen our dances are skeptical. How can dance be used for proclamation or for worship, they wonder. This is natural for a western mind to ask, as they see dance used mainly for entertainment and relaxation. But Indian classical dances have a divine touch and they have been used as vehicles of Truth. Once a man in Paris came to me and said 'if Christianity is presented in this way, I have no problem in accepting it'.

The *how* of these performances will help us to understand the *why* of the performances, and the effect on the audience. Before we perform a dance, be it in a church or on stage, a brief explanation is given with the help of gestures and finger-movements called '*mudras*'. E.g. if we perform a dance in honour of the Blessed Trinity, then the body gestures for God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are demonstrated. In the course of the dance at every 2nd or 3rd minute a word of commentary is inserted into the lyrics giving in the local language the main sense of what the lyrics are communicating. The dancers learn to mime in whichever language we are presenting – be it German, French, Kannada, Hindi, Tamil or English. This process binds the attention of our audience. They cease to be mere spectators and become participants. The dancers take a lot of trouble to be able to mime in a foreign language.

3.1. An Increase of Devotion and Meaning in Prayer

The body language used to express the feelings and sentiments, devotion and homage has helped many people pray better and also understand the deeper and wider significance of liturgical prayers. Visuals and symbols are a great help in liturgical celebrations. Unfortunately in our liturgy the gestures, postures and body language are exclusively reserved to the priests. The congregation responds with minimum of responses. When the dancers by their body language give expression to their love for God, to their act of surrender to God, to their gratitude to God, the congregation finds it easier to put themselves in the place of the dancers. The congregation generally feels happy when someone helps them to give expression to their innermost thoughts, and enables them to translate their words into language and gestures. The dancers articulate the prayers of the

congregation. Today people in the Church do not like to be mere spectators, but truly participants. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* emphasized that our liturgy should be active and participatory. A prayer like 'Our Father' is normally rattled in the Church in about 20 seconds. We take 4 minutes to present a dance on the prayer 'Our Father' which helps people experience the prayer, and feel touched by God. Our Indian music for *bhajans* has helped people find a sense of peace and harmony within themselves. Therefore at times after a liturgical dance some people say 'let me now remain for a while in silence to continue this sense of peace and harmony that I experience within'.

3.2. A Conviction that we are a World Church, truly Catholic

The intention of II Vatican Council, that we are a World Church is largely fulfilled when people of different countries, languages and cultures come together to interact and pray. The presence of our dance troupe for various occasions – be it *Katholikentag* or *Weltmissionsontag*, or Inter-faith meetings or *Lange Nacht der Kirchen* or Jubilees of various Societies like *Kirche in Not* or *Missions Estrangers de Paris* – has given a feeling that we are one in our faith, though there can be different faith-expressions. Many missionaries went out from European countries to the rest of the world and they promoted dialogue and inculturation. Some of the retired missionaries, the pioneers of dialogue and inculturation after they have returned to their own country, feel that they have come a full circle when our dance troupe comes to them. What they had laboured for, we have been able to harvest. Their energy spent, their donations given, were not a waste they feel. The real meaning of 'Catholic' is becoming more and more clear to people through these art forms, i.e., *Catholic* does not only mean that the Church is spread all over the world, but also that the Church should embrace all the goodness and beauty that we find in every culture and religion in the world. There is a living encounter that is going on between the religions of the East and West.⁴ There are interactions between different believers of each religion, which need not necessarily be on religious

4 P.Pulikkan, Interreligious Dialogue, the Context of Doing Theology Today, *EJDC* I(2008)28.

basis, and that tells us that this natural and human way of dialoguing with each other goes on.

4. Implications for Dialogue

The Bible which *Nrityavani* proclaims and from which we take our inspiration is an excellent example of dialogue with cultures and religions as it represents the synthesis of various cultures and customs of the ancient people of the Fertile Crescent. Israelites had to struggle to maintain their faith in the midst of different cultures. At the same time the writers have taken into consideration the different cultures while expressing their faith in the Biblical God. The God of the Bible is not an exclusive one, accepting only Israel and discarding all other people. He wanted that through Israel, His salvation may be incarnated in various cultures of the nations of the world. Asia's inclusive attitude fits in well with the God of the Bible.

4.1. God the Master-artist

Creation is the most wonderful art of God. We simply wonder at the beauty of it. Artist needs creativity and imagination because he has to create from nothing. For this he needs to depend on the Creator himself in whom we see that creativity. Moreover, an artist tries to reflect the beauty of the Creator in the art. One of the outstanding characteristics of God's creation is variety which results in harmony. The creation is a witness to the fact that God is pluralistic. But God is such a master artist that God can bring about unity in diversity, simplicity in complexity and harmony in the midst of differences. Art forms as promoted by *Nrityavani* therefore are a source of dialogue and unity. By overcoming the man-made barriers of race, religion and culture, they unite the people at the heart level.

4.2. Foreignness of Christianity

Christianity is generally considered foreign to Asia: either colonialists' religion or white persons' religion. Christians themselves are responsible for this state of affairs, particularly by their way of dressing, modes of prayer, embracing western culture as of greater value than Indian culture. However many Asians know and love Jesus. It is the Christian or Christianity that they have aversion to. Therefore if any effective dialogue has to take place the Church has to shed its

imported cultural baggage, and be imbedded in the culture of the country.⁵ Art Forms as promoted by *Nrityavani* will be of great help in this regard. Fortunately the attitude towards Indian cultural art forms like dance drama and music is changing. *Nrityavani* has given a lead in this matter.

4.3. *Faith Experience versus Dogmas*

Asian world-view is more organic. Faith has to be expressed not only through dogmatic formulations, but it has to be associated with the experiential, symbolic, affective, intuitive and holistic. Dogmas are limited in a sense that they are incapable of articulating the ineffable mysteries, such as Trinity, Incarnation etc. The first Christian communities articulated and shared their experience not by giving shape to dogmatic formulations. In the same way our experience of Jesus shared through our life stories, through art forms as *Nrityavani* does, is important for us today.

4.4. *Universality of God's Spirit*

The Spirit of Jesus dwells in us, and also in the hearts of all peoples, cultures and religions. When we actually live, study, reflect, pray and work with them in mutual trust for the good of all, we experience the presence of the Spirit better. Our dance group consists of Christians, Hindus, Muslims, *dalits* and tribals. There are men and women in the group, children, youth and adults coming from different states of India – Rajasthan, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh – making it a very complicated but healthy mixture. The beauty of the group consists in this that people of different faiths, ages and genders can come together, live together and work together in harmony in spite of differences. The Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians says that Christians should meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together towards Truth and to work together in projects of common concern.⁶ In our age of individualism, when many artists cannot work hand in hand with other artists, the *Nrityavani* group of

5 E.K Chia, Asian Perspectives on Christianity, *JMJ* Autumn 2007, 157-59)

6 Secretariat for Non-Christians, *Dialogue and Mission, The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions*, Rome, 1984.)

artists finds joy, fulfillment and excellence in staying and working together. They consider that when the talents of each one are pooled together, their production becomes wholesome and appealing. Forming a community of love from people of various backgrounds is a challenge today in a world of wrong notions of freedom and individualism. People in the West are particularly pleased to see young people coming together and working for a particular cause, sacrificing at times their own personal agenda. The lifestyle of *Nrityavani* is becoming a very good model of *inter-faith live together* which the Church is striving to promote.

4.5. *Missio inter gentes*

Missio ad gentes and *missio inter gentes* have to go hand in hand in Asia. We need to project the image of the Church as both, though in the past we went more for *missio ad gentes*. We Christians had often projected an image of the Church that is triumphalistic, powerful, efficient and impersonal. Jesus compared his followers to leaven in the dough which silently brings about transformation. An inculturated approach and contextualized spirituality will help in the expression, articulation and application of the faith of the Church in Jesus Christ as universal mediator of salvation to our concrete situation, problems and needs. By immersing ourselves in the cultural art forms, and by inspiring the society from within we will be able to feel at home with the people with whom we live and move.

5. The Vision of NBCLC in retelling the story of Jesus through music and dance:

The Evangelists have retold the story of Jesus to their audiences according to the way their audiences were able to understand. We in our times ought to translate the Word of God according to the thought patterns of our people. Story appeals to everyone, young and old. When we present our God-experience in story form, dance or drama, our audiences recall to mind their own stories and build a connection between their stories and the story of Jesus. Narrative theology is more accepted today than conceptual theology. Narrative theology appeals to all five senses and fulfils the longing of the entire person. Christian mission has been full of prose and reason. It is more defined

by philosophies, dogmas and laws. As a result it gets closed and loses its spontaneity. It needs to make use of poetry and stories. The Gospel of Jesus is largely presented as 'knowledge' and not as 'beauty'.⁷ God is Truth *and* Beauty. Whatever is true is always beautiful. Hence we make use of metaphors, myths, narratives and autobiographies to communicate truth. Truth is much larger reality than we can ever imagine. Such an approach will result in joy and delight. "Behold, I bring you Good News of great joy", announced the angels at the birth of Jesus. The Gospel becomes an experience when it appeals to all the senses as St. John tells us "...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have touched,the Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1). People are longing to listen to God-experiences of others, and learn from such testimonies to deepen their faith in God. NBCLC therefore continues its search particularly through *Nrityavani* to retell the story of the experience of Jesus to our cultures, to our religions and in our socio-economic context.

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7 Antony Kalliath, cmi., Telling the 'Story' of Jesus in Asia (A Creative Paradigm and An Innovative Praxis), *Word & Worship*, Vol.39, No.5, Nov-Dec.2006, p.293.

Promotion of Inter-religious Friendship

M. Santiago

Maitri Bhavan at the heart of the Holy City of Varanasi has made significant contributions to promote a culture of peace and harmony and to forestall communal violence in the city. Its former director Fr. M. Santiago has cultivated good friendly relations with the local heads of religious communities.

Varanasi, a Confluence of Religions.

The Hindi word *maitri* means *friendship*. Maitri Bhavan- *Home of Friendship* in the heart of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, has been engaged, for the past many years, in fostering and furthering of friendship and fellowship among the adherents of diverse religious and cultural traditions, in a spirit of '*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' (the whole world is a family). As one who was part of this Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue for the last twelve years, what I share here with the esteemed readers is based on the perceptions, experiences and reflections which grew in me as I journeyed with people of other faiths, as a co-pilgrim, co-worker for the cause of *maitri*, harmony and peace in the city of Varanasi.

Varanasi is a miniature India in itself - a mosaic of religious and cultural diversity of India. It is considered to be the '*heart*' of Hinduism, where one can encounter the *living text* of Hinduism. It is to this '*abode of Lord Shiva*' and the sacred river '*Mother Ganges*' that millions and millions of Hindu pilgrims have been flocking, from time immemorial, in search of peace and *vaikunta* (salvation). Varanasi is a '*home*' to the Buddhists as well, as it was here in Saranath that

the Enlightened One, turned the Wheel of Dharma. Out of the twenty four Thirthankaras, that the Jains believe in, five including Lord Parshvanath, the twenty third Thirthankara, were born in Varanasi, making it a much revered place of pilgrimage for the Jains too. Guru Nanak Dev (1469-1538), Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708), the Founder and Profounder of Sikhism and Bhai Gurudas, a great Sikh missionary and nephew of Guru Amardas, the third Sikh Guru, are believed to have preached Sikhism in the city of Varanasi, making it a venerable site to the Sikhs as well. As for the other religions, Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Bahais and others, it may not have the kind of religious significance the aforesaid ones can boast of, yet because of their long history of presence and numerical strength, they have been valuable sojourners in the long cherished history and heritage of this ancient city. The Muslim presence dates back to 1194 when Kutubuddin Aibak, the Sultanate of Delhi, invaded the city. Interestingly, one third of the inhabitants of the city today are Muslims. As regards Christians, the Protestant Christian missionaries from Serampur, Calcutta, who landed here first, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, to propagate the Holy Bible, after it was made available in the local vernacular through the laborious efforts of Reverend William Carey. The Catholic Christian presence can be traced back to 1848 when the saintly Bishop Hartmann of Patna Vicariate, on a visit to the city, got a small house transformed into a chapel, for the use of the military personnel, serving in the British army, though a couple of Jesuit astronomers are believed to have stayed in Varanasi and helped Raja Chet Singh of Rajasthan to establish an Observatory on the banks of Ganges, in the late eighteenth century.

Varanasi is a replica of the cultural fabric of India too, where one comes across diverse cultural, linguistic and ethnic groups from all parts of the country, markedly distinguishable as they crowd the worship centres and market places. There are certain localities in the city which have a concentrated population of people from a particular State or region who have been living in this city, perhaps for centuries. One hears, therefore, of Bengali Tola, Pathani Tola, Gujarathi Gali etc. There are areas on the southern end of the river in the city that have been populated by South Indians. As a centre of

arts, music and dance, Varanasi resonates with the rhythm and vibrations of different forms of music, dance, drama etc.

Varanasi, a City of Spiritual Harmony

In the midst of all this diversity, there runs through a strong thread of unity, brotherhood and tolerance, making it once again a replica of India's prized heritage – 'unity in diversity'. People from all walks of life, belonging to different faiths and cultural and linguistic traditions have lived together for centuries in a spirit of peaceful co-existence which is best expressed in the local saying: 'Ganga-Jamuni-Sanskriti'. The word 'sanskriti' means culture. The very fact that the motherly Ganges accepts anything and everything is symbolic of the spirit of appreciation and accommodation reflected in the life of the city. That is why a practising Muslim like Bismillah Khan, the late Shahnai Maestro, could give a performance in the holy precincts of the temples, Noor Fatima, a practising criminal lawyer could erect a temple in honour of Lord Shiva, Christian religious personnel come to sing Christian Bhajans in the temple dedicated to Lord Vishwanath! The list would be endless. May we not forget that Varanasi is the birth-place of Saint Kabir (1398-1518), a reformer poet and an Apostle of Hindu-Muslim unity. The Hindus revere him as a Vaishnavite Bhakta, the Muslims as a Peer, the Sikhs call him a Bhagat and the Kabirpanthis worship him as God- Incarnate. The legacy of Kabir is carried on even to this day by well-meaning, enlightened and committed individuals, religious leaders, scholars, social activists and institutions and organizations who believe in the principle of 'religious diversity and spiritual unity' following the maxim : 'unity in essential things, diversity in the accidentals and charity in all things.' And it is mainly because of their efforts to promote harmony and peace that Varanasi, by and large has remained a city of communal harmony and peaceful co-existence.

Communal Harmony, a Challenge and a Grace

This in no way means that it has not suffered the pangs of communal tensions. Who can forget the riots of 1984 in the aftermath of the assassination of Srimati Indira Gandhi? How can we erase from our memory the horrendous killings of innocents after the

demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992? The city had witnessed communal violence in 1972, 1978, 1989 and 1990 too! In fact, until 1992, whenever there was communal tension or riot especially between Hindus and Muslims in any part of the country, tremors could be felt in the city of Varanasi. It could have been due to the divisive communal politics being played by the politicians and the rise of religious fundamentalism thereon. But in all these disturbing situations, it were the type of people, institutions and organizations mentioned above that helped ease tensions, restore normalcy, working of course, in tandem with the civic and police administration. Thankfully, Varanasi has not faced a major communal problem since 1992, even though anti-social and anti-human elements try unsuccessfully, from time to time, to create bad blood among the people of the two major religious communities. But there are skirmishes at the time of celebration of festivals especially when the festival dates of both the major religious groups fall around the same time, forcing the city administration to be on pins and needles.

One of the major reasons for the near absence of communal problems over the last few years in Varanasi is due to the 'awareness-building and peace works' of those peace loving and peace promoting individuals, institutions and organizations. Also, the general public has become today quite disenchanted with the religious-divide policies of the corrupt politicians. They are tired of this type of uncalled for tensions. And therefore, they are not ready to play into the hands of these power-hungry politicians any more. They are awake now, rather awakened. This was amply demonstrated in the way the city responded, under the leadership of Prof. Veerbhadra Mishra, Mahant, Sankat Mochan Temple and Maulana Abdul Batin Nomani, Mufti-E-Benares, to the bomb explosions both at the renowned Sankat Mochan Temple premises and at the Cantt. Railway Station on March 6, 2006, which left 21 people killed and 101 injured. Kudos to these two leaders whose sanity, sagacity and courage thwarted the nefarious designs of evil-mongers who wanted to flare up communal passions by giving a communal twist to the entire tragedy! Yet another attempt was made on November 23, 2007, to create terror and to disrupt peace in the city, when a bomb exploded in the District Court premises, killing

9 people including 3 lawyers. Once again, the city displayed enormous sense of resistance and resilience, not succumbing to the terror-tactics of the insane trouble-shooters.

Maitri Bhavan

Maitri Bhavan which has been religiously involved in the task of 'building bridges', 'harmonious relations' among the people of different faiths and cultures in the city for the last thirty years, did play a major role in those moments of tensions and turbulences, as it did at the time of 1984 riots too. With its reputation built over the years, as a Centre, truly committed to the cause of 'maitri', communal harmony and peace and with its vast net-working with like-minded individuals, institutions and organizations, was able to galvanize the people of the city, by organizing as well as being an active collaborator of various programmes in the city, to demonstrate a collective resolve to shun the path of hatred and violence and to commit themselves to a culture of peace.

It was in fact Fr. Raimon Panikkar, the famous proponent of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, a priest of Varanasi diocese, even to this day, who sowed the seeds of 'inter-religious dialogue' first in this religiously, culturally and intellectually vibrant city, way back in 1950s, much before Vatican II. As a priest-student of Indian Philosophy and Religion in the world-famous Benares Hindu University, Fr. Panikkar used to have, in an informal way, what came to be known later as 'philosophic tea' with the professors, scholars and intellectuals of the city. Seizing on the bold initiative of Fr. Panikkar, Bishop Patrick, an ardent promoter of inter-religious dialogue and inculturation, gave an organized shape to this very important and emerging *mission* of the Church, by establishing the Satsang Sadan - Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue in 1978. Satsang Sadan, over the years, has come to be known as Maitri Bhavan. Frs. Roque D'Costa, Ignatius Puthiadam SJ and Rajmohan IMS have all assiduously worked to make Maitri Bhavan what it is today. It is a collaborative venture now between the Indian Missionary Society and the Diocese of Varanasi.

During the past 30 years of its existence, Maitri Bhavan has made a mark for itself in the map of the city as a meeting place of minds

and hearts of people of good will, committed to fostering human and spiritual values and to promoting peace and harmony in society. It organizes on a regular basis, prayer meetings, seminars, symposiums, workshops for different groups, interactive sessions between Church personnel and religious personnel of other religious traditions, lectures on different religious Scriptures, special programmes like inter-religious Quiz for school children, medical camps for the poor etc. It also celebrates an important festival of each religious tradition. Every programme organized is of inter-religious nature and most of the times in collaboration with like-minded organizations and institutions, sometimes 20-25 of them together organizing a single programme depending on the nature of the programme. And these programmes could be organized anywhere in the city - in the premises of worship places, educational institutes, training centres or welfare organizations. Over the years, Maitri Bhavan has been able to build a core-team consisting of religious leaders, intellectuals, scholars and social activists of the city, to help in the organization of the programmes.

A couple of major events in the city, in the recent past, have placed Maitri Bhavan, truly in the spotlight. First, a three-day celebration of the Beatification of Mother Teresa in October 2003. Initiated by Bishop Patrick D'Souza, it was a celebration by the city, under the leadership of Maitri Bhavan. The late Prof. Vishnukant Shastri, Former Governor of Uttar Pradesh graced the inter-religious prayer service that was organized in her honour on that occasion, with his benign presence. Second, active collaboration with the eight-day National Youth Camp organized by Dr. Subbarao, the famous Gandhian's National Youth Project which brought together 350 youth from different parts of the country. The youth vowed to work for national integration and communal harmony. And of course, Mairi Bhavan's major role was in the aftermath of the bomb-blasts in 2006.

Dialogue beyond Fences

Inter-religious Dialogue, as we all know, is primarily a Church initiative, although Akbar the Great (1556-1605) is said to have initiated this exercise in his court in Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, as part of the process to start a synthetic religion called '*Din-Ilahi*', but with little success.

In the city of Varanasi too, it has been a Church initiative for many years. But all that seems to be changing now. It has become the need of every person who recognizes the plurality and spiritual unity of religions and who wants concord, not discord in the society. And therefore, celebration of any religious festival or commemoration of any day of national and social importance has become today an inter-religious one. Till some years ago, one could not think of an inter-religious celebration of Ganesh Festival or Id Festival or a religious event on the banks of the sacred river Ganges, but it is happening today! Even marriages are solemnized in the presence of teachers of different faiths! A non-Muslim could not think of getting into a Mosque or a Madarsa till some years ago but that has become a thing of the past. Inter-religious prayers and seminars are organized in the Madarsas for which people of other faiths are invited. I consider this development as a happy result of the impact of the 'bridge-building' works of Centres and Institutes like Maitri Bhavan. I deem it God's great blessing to the people of Varanasi, to the Church in Varanasi, nay to the Universal Church and to the entire humanity.

Personally for me, the last twelve years at Maitri Bhavan, have been a journey, an experience of a life-time, as I walked with the practitioners of other religions as a co-pilgrim, sharing my life and faith, allowing myself to be tested and tempered, cleansed and enriched by their life and faith. It was a joy working together for the cause of *maitri* among followers of different religions, among humanists, intellectuals and social activists with a shared vision and commitment.

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Promoting the Culture of Dialogue in Bengal

Sunil Rosario

Kolkata, with the strong presence of the poor and a vibrant presence of diverse religions offers a fertile ground for an effective inter-religious dialogue for the liberation of the poor.

Upbringing in a Pluralistic Milieu

I am privileged to be born in a pluralistic society. Right from my birth, I grew in this rich cultural and religious milieu. Though my upbringing has been in a Catholic family, the faith was inherited from then undivided Bengal. My parents come from a Bengali village, now in Bangladesh, where one time there were over 90% catholics. The great Augustinian Missionaries taught them catechism and grilled them into Catholicism. I am proud to be born in such heritage of a believing community.

For survival and in search of sustenance, my father had to leave his village when he was only 14. For him it was a journey to the unknown, discovering new situations and realities, meeting people from other religio-cultural backgrounds. After his marriage he preferred to settle down in a town, totally foreign in every way. Despite all these, he was bold enough to face the challenges of his time since forties of the last century.

Though born in a traditionally Bengali family, I inherited a culture and environment totally different from my native Bangladesh. I was born in Ranchi, now the capital of Jharkhand. Though my parents wanted to educate me through Bengali or English medium, this was not possible due to many factors. In fact, two of my elder brothers were sent to Calcutta for their studies through St. Lawrence's High

School, one of the esteemed schools run by Jesuits in Calcutta. They had to discontinue due to some reasons. After much thinking, discussing and reflection my parents decided to have me admitted into the Hindi Medium school, St. Aloysius', which also was run by the Jesuits for very poor students. I had no choice. At home, we spoke our colloquial Bengali and in the school I had to talk in Hindi. From Class IV I joined St. John's High school, run by the Jesuits in Hindi medium. Fr. V. Tucker, SJ was the principal then who admitted me to the school with much care and concern. He was a true shepherd of souls in the school. In School, where I studied, I sat with Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains. They were all my friends. The seed of vocation to enter into dialogue ministry was probably sown during my childhood upbringing itself.

My formative years in Dialogue

After I joined for priesthood, in the Seminary, I took keen interest to develop my potentialities in literature, classical music or anything that will take me closer to the people. Literature and culture of Bengal always fascinated me and I wished to deepen myself through the study of great authors of literature and those contributed to the cultural traditions in Bengal. Rabindra sangeet, the songs of Atul Prasad and Ranjnikanto put me to ecstasy. The kirtans of Shri Chaitanya, folk songs and Baul singing gave me a mystical trance. During my Seminary formation, I was fortunate to complete Bachelor in Music in 1977 from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad, by attending summer courses at Pachmarhi. My conviction in priestly formation and later on in ministry has been to reach out to as many people as possible and speak to them the values Jesus has given to the Church. This conviction has inspired me to go deeper into literature and classical music.

A multi-cultural approach to life and people became part of my personality development with a deeper way to understand and to take the Kingdom values to the people of Bengal and beyond. When I was sent by the Archdiocese to do my Masters in Hindi Literature in Allahabad University, I was challenged to live my Faith realistically in a totally Hindu milieu and atmosphere. We were two Catholics in the Class. The majority of my class mates were Hindus, some Muslims

and others from other religious backgrounds. Thus when I came to the college as a university student, I had similar experience as in school days. In fact, my association with the companions strengthened my Faith. Never had I felt that I am different from them. We used to have weekly “Kavi Sammelan” (young poet’s recitations), where we recited our self composed poems. My friends appreciated my contributions. The students looked up to us; the staff and students had a cordial relationship. They cooperated in every way. I was able to give witness to my Christian presence in the university.

Creative steps and involvement in Dialogue

My priestly commitment within the Diocesan set-up became a challenge to execute many of my dreams on inter-religious dialogue and my hopes and aspirations to extend the mission of Jesus to all people, who are hungering for Jesus, to know Him more and live by his values in the present disturbing trends. Despite many hurdles, I have been encouraged in this field of ministry to do my best through personal initiatives.

In my efforts for Dialogue, both literature and music have been very important tools to reach out to many people of various faith communities. Being a diocesan priest, I could find time to spend with the people of other faiths. During the last 30 years of my priesthood, I was immensely enriched by them in meeting persons from various walks of life and status. For me inter-religious dialogue has become a way of life. I have grown gradually in this area of concern through my priestly ministries. Since 1996, I am directly involved in the ministry of dialogue officially in the Archdiocese. This has given me opportunity to create new avenues for dialogue. I feel, the ministry of dialogue requires immense creativity, personal touch with people of other faith communities and many other initiatives. I find people in general very open to dialogue as they build bridges for peace and harmony.

Kolkata – A city of Dialogue

Kolkata is basically a city of multi-religious and pluri-cultural traditions. The meeting point for dialogue in Kolkata in the midst of the plurality of religions and cultures is the human person and its

survival. Kolkata continues to grow in the civilization of love and concern for one another. Together with religious practices among various faith communities, Kolkata has a strong political consciousness. The issues of human rights and dignity of human person are some of the main concerns. The *City of Joy*, in the midst of many pain and suffering, is essentially dialogical. The City has the worst of poverty; also it is the city of wealth and riches. People belonging to different faiths, i.e. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Tribals and Ethnic communities co-exist here. There are acceptance, tolerance and healthy interactions of religious beliefs. It is said, Bengal has 12 months and 13 festivities. It is a city of joyful celebration. People of all faiths take part in the celebrations of one another and thus create a harmonious blend. Thus, Kolkata has a strong pluralistic sense to accommodate all religious groups and ethnic societies. It is a unique city, where people show their care and concern for one another in times of difficulties and crisis.

The Church in Kolkata has been active in the field of inter-religious dialogue through its mission of education for all, irrespective of caste, creed, colour, race and socio-economical backgrounds, through health care and socio-economic developmental programmes. In Kolkata, the religions are accepted and tolerated. There is a deep desire among the people to be enriched by the inner spiritual strengths of one another's religious and spiritual tenets. The Church's contribution in all these areas is much appreciated by all the people.

Last couple of years, it was possible for me to organize a number of seminars and inter-faith prayer meetings on various occasions through the cooperation and help of others. This way I was able to conscientize people of all Faith for dialogue. People have invited me to give talks in their own centres, like Mahanirban Temple, Ballygunj, Jain Temple, Belgachia, to sing Bhajans and hymns at Belur Math, at inter-religious prayer services during Saraswati Puja, Bijoya and Deepawali etc (Hindu Festivals). Every year we hold an *inter-faith prayer service* at the tomb of Blessed Teresa of Kolkata on her Inspiration Day, Sept 10. From my experience I can say, people are very open for dialogue in Kolkata.

Of course, there are various levels of dialogue. Depending on people's interest and situations, there is the 'dialogue of action, dialogue of life, dialogue of religious experience and theological exchange. The Ramakrishna Mission, Golpark organizes intellectual discourses for the people in Kolkata regularly. Now-a-days, the Universities and its associate institutions are also taking interest along this line. Seminars, workshops, short-term programs are organized to create an awareness among people for dialogue. The dialogue is done both informally and formally.

In the recent past, there have been efforts mainly by the Jesuits for inter-religious dialogue in a formal manner. This has been a very specialized field of ministry. The Jesuits with whom I came in touch were Fr. Antoine, Fr. Fallon, Fr. G. Beckers, Fr. Van Exem and others. They taught at the Universities and associated themselves with the intellegentia of Kolkata. They were easily acceptable to the High class Bengali Society. Their contributions in the field of dialogue have been well appreciated.

The Kolkata Forum for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Harmony.

The CBCI Commission for Ecumenism and Dialogue had sponsored a seminar, "An Inter-religious Dialogue for Peace and Communal Harmony", two years ago. The participants and speakers were from all faith-communities. As a follow-up to this, now we have a team, which consists of members from various faith-communities. We have made a Vision Statement for Dialogue in Kolkata. The members are very enthusiastic to come together. It is now called Kolkata Forum for Inter-Faith Dialogue and Harmony. We have met and made plan of actions to be implemented. Several Poets' Sammelan were organized in and around Kolkata. Many distinguished poets and literary figures took part in these gatherings. It gave an opening to interact with those who are deeply involved in the secular field. Our common efforts are to help people to grow in the culture of dialogue and cultivate the civilization of love.

The Vision Statement has been formulated as follows

We, the members of various Faith Communities pledge to promote

Peace and Harmony within communities and communities in relation to other Religions and Cultures. We shall respect the tenets of every Religion and try our utmost to put into practice the tenets of our own Religion to create an atmosphere of Peace and Harmony, wherever we are.

We shall respect the Fundamental Rights of the Individuals, irrespective of caste, creed and status, as enshrined in the Constitution.

As far as possible, we shall invite those who also work for Integration and Harmony among the people of various communities belonging to various Cultures and Traditions.

In our Pluralistic Country, we shall implement such programs which will be meant for Community Development, National Integration, Ecology, Peace and harmony.

By our own exemplary life of prayer and total commitment to the cause of Peace and Harmony, we will enlighten others to do Justice, establish Truth at all levels and spread Love everywhere.

Kolkata has been the centre of Cultural and Religious heritage. It is a place of hospitality and human concern. We pledge to revive the spirit of those great leaders who promoted peace and harmony and helped people to be awakened to fight for freedom from various oppressive structures, oppressions and enslavement.

We pledge to fight the negative impacts of LPG culture (Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization) and Fundamentalism, which are creating a gulf between the rich and the poor, the marginalized and between various Faith Communities. We pledge to be open to one another and thus build a true Human Community, where every individual will find one's dignity, respect and love.

From the experience I have gained so far, I can say that dialogue is a process of growing together, keeping in mind our differences and uniqueness. We come to share, discuss and pray together. But there is another dimension to dialogue, i.e. in order to become socially

prophetic and productive, dialogue should tend to conflict resolution. In our pluralistic and democratic society conflict is a basis for social change, hence a healthy confrontation in conflict situation can give a sense of interdependence. Through dialogue we come to know the deeper reality of self and the other.

Dialogue for the liberation of the poor

Concern for integral human liberation is the central concern of all religions. Hence, the human person - especially the suffering human person - is the meeting point of religions. This is obvious in Kolkata and greater Bengal. The works of involvement for human welfare bind the hearts and minds of believers of diverse religions. Millions of poor live in Kolkata city and here a rich plurality of religions is still very vibrant. In some corners, there are joint efforts and commitments to justice and peace, freedom and fellowship. The Church in Kolkata is very much involved in various capacities to serve the poor and the needy. The compassion of Jesus Christ is alive today through the ministry of the Church and its institutions. The Church in Kolkata is essentially dialogical, may not be directly, but indirectly.

The National Vision Statement for Dialogue, Bangalore, 2005 states:

The Commission for Religious Harmony, CBCI, faithful to the call of Jesus and in response to the context of our times, envisions the emergence of a society in which religious, racial, ethnic, cultural, ideological and other identities and traditions of India are accepted and promoted through creative interaction for the promotion of harmony and well-being of all.

One of the thrusts of the recent Asian Mission Congress was to explore the Asian way of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ in "continuous, humble and loving dialogue" with Asia's poor, with its local cultures and with other religious traditions, acknowledging certain complementarities which exist between peoples, cultures, religious traditions and world-visions, without denying differences, thus recognizing that inter-religious dialogue is a 'means of reciprocal enrichment' (DI.2 & RM. 55) and mutual advancement on the road of religious inquiry and experience (RM. 56).

In order to execute our ministry in dialogue, there is a deeper need to understand the religio-cultural and socio-economic context of the pastoral task. The development of attitudes and skills with factual knowledge are essential to develop this ministry of dialogue. It can mean effective pastoral interventions.

Hans Kung in his book "Christianity" explains, "...the world is becoming smaller and smaller, the interactions between people of different civilizations are becoming increasingly numerous....But also for reasons of culture and religious politics: i. because the differences between civilizations are not only real but fundamental, often age-old and all-embracing, from the upbringing of children and the constitution of the state to the understanding of nature and God; ii. because many people are once again reflecting on their religious roots as a result of the cultural alienation and disillusionment which the West brought about in the process of economic and social modernization; iii. because human cultural characteristics and differences are less variable and dispensable than political and economic characteristics and differences (Hans Kung: Christianity, London, SCM Press, 1995, p. 782).

Dr. Felix Wilfred, in his book "Asian Dreams and Christian Hope", (pg. xvi) says, "Asia is the testing ground for the hope of humanity. Here live two-thirds of world's poor and exploited. The hope is most resplendent when it emanates from the victims of our present world, from the suffering humanity. It is like the lotus flower that blossoms from the muddy ground. The dreams of the poor and the yearnings of their hearts point to the sun of hope to which the whole human family needs to look up.

Without food, shelter, literacy, primary health-care and social security, there is no hope for the Asian masses. Every step that goes in the direction of the enablement of the poor is one that increases hope for the world. The poor are helplessly at the mercy of the ruling powers and their vagaries. The abuse of power and rampant corruption are sources of frustration and anger for the poor. Power, no matter of what kind, should be made accountable; its wings need to be clipped. Hope is awakened among people when they see the

prospects of transforming power from being domination to power as enablement.

This happens when the poor gain self-respect, dignity, rights and the freedom for self-determination. Asia is made of pluri-cultural and multi-ethnic societies. It is therefore, ultimately a question of justice. Denial of pluralism kills justice before destroying true unity. It is by affirming the "difference" that the poor have the hope to reclaim their very selves. Pluralism in Asia is, thus, the defence as well as the hope of the poor vis-à-vis the powerful who stand for an agenda of pseudo-unity. The current situation in India with the fundamentalist and communalist forces will illustrate this point.

During this new millennium, our forging of new relationship with our neighbors of other religious traditions, will be inspired by the realities to which we will be witnesses. Father Wilfred says, "A Christianity that listens to Asia will feel urged to develop a new and distinct language to be able to relate with the people of this continent. Much of the prevalent language is one that isolates the Christian community from their world and environment. It should be an era of relational language, ending the epoch of the language of isolation".

Two thousand years of Christian tradition should help rather than hinder the new millennium. "It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in it is suicide" (Gandhi). In this millennium, by encountering peoples and nations, cultures and religions ever more deeply, Christianity will come to acquire a new shape and configuration. Asia has a great mission to fulfill. With its millennial civilization, when Asia encounters Christian faith from its very core, we could look forward to something Christianity has never experienced in the course of its history.

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Inter-religious Dialogue Cell – Pilar, Goa

Ivon D' Almeida

Ivon D' Almeida SFX has organized an *Inter-religious Dialogue Cell* in Goa with well-designed programmes in schools and colleges to form the minds of the future generation in openness to other religions. Besides friends of other religions he gets his seminarians actively involved in these programmes.

The Genesis of the Cell

“The Inter-religious Dialogue Cell” is an inter-religious dialogue activity of the Society of the Missionaries of St. Francis Xavier, commonly known as Society of Pilar or Pilar Fathers. This Cell organizes all its inter-religious dialogue activities from the ‘Pilar Theological College’, the Major Seminary of Pilar Fathers. Among the many other seminal programmes this is one of the key formative programmes in the Seminary. This year the Inter-religious Dialogue Cell completes twenty years of its existence.

While God has blessed Goa with various natural gifts, one of the most precious divine gifts is communal harmony. People of different religions, Hindus, Muslims and Christians live a peaceful co-existence in Goa. In fact harmony and peace are equated with *Goanness* that existed among the Goans down the centuries. We the Pilar Fathers are very proud of this great heritage, since the Society was founded in Goa on 26th September 1887. Goa stands out like a shining example to the rest of the subcontinent, in fraternal fellow feeling among the

citizens. This harmony, however, we would not like to take for granted. Like all other precious things, we the Pilar Fathers want to commit zealously to guard it and pass it down to the coming generations.

Imbued with this firm conviction, the Society of Pilar began by hosting a *live-in* for a group of like-minded people of various Faiths in Goa, from 19th January to 1st February 1988, at Pilar, Goa. People of different faiths from all over Goa attended this *live-in*. The resource persons were two eminent persons, namely Fr. Albert Nambiaparambil, the then Secretary of the CBCI Commission for Inter-Faith Dialogue in India and Shri S. N. Rao, Vedanta scholar and co-worker in the Dialogue Promotion Movement in India. It was attended by people of different faiths: Hindus, Muslims, Christians and several secular-minded people of various walks of life: lecturers, teachers, social workers, together with common people, who set the ball in motion in all earnest.

The aftermath of this *live-in* was a very strong unanimous desire to respond to the divine call to unite ourselves to form a “movement” to strive for communal harmony and peace among people of different religions. The movement was called “Solidarity Forum”, which is now called “Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell” (*Sarva Samnvaya Manch*).

The “Inter-religious Dialogue Cell” is a non-political, socially oriented forum for all men and women of goodwill who will channelize their efforts and energies to make it an instrument of love, peace and fraternal unity. “Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell-Pilar” firmly believes that it will be effective and fruitful only if it is rooted in spiritual values, without becoming sectarian. The Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell is a dynamic movement rather than a rigid structure.

The Organization

The Inter-Religious Cell strives to:

- * bind together in brotherly/sisterly bonds, people of all faiths and also strengthen and build on the age-old bonds of solidarity and friendliness among the peoples especially among the college students and teachers;

- * oppose, by positive means, any attempts by anyone, aimed at destroying the harmony that exists among people of diverse faiths;
- * train the students of Theology, who are studying in Pilar Theological College, to promote inter-religious harmony and to appreciate other faiths in their future ministry as missionaries.

The Society of Pilar, being conscious of its mission among the people of other faiths, trains the students for dialogue ministry right from the novitiate onwards. This training continues till the students reach the final year of theological studies. There are various courses and seminars introduced to the students to equip themselves for dialogue ministry. Besides the courses and seminars the students visit worship places of other faiths - mosques, temples, gurudwaras. This exposure gives a first hand experience to the students in discussing and learning the worship patterns of people of other faiths.

As part of their formation, the fourth year students of Pilar Theological College are actively involved in the inter-religious activities of Pilar along with the Priest Coordinator under the guidance of the Rector, and with the collaboration of the Inter-religious Dialogue Cell. The team includes also a few Hindu and Muslim resource persons. The Priest Coordinator contacts different institutions especially colleges and various interested institutions to plan inter-religious programmes. The Theological College firmly believes that involving the students in dialogue activities will help them be agents to promote such activities later in their place of ministry. As the Pilar Fathers are working mainly among the people of other faiths, this is one of the primary formative thrusts we have in the Seminary.

Every weekend, the team visits various colleges in Goa and conducts a variety of sessions on inter-religious harmony. Discursive sessions, seminars, retreats, group discussions, questionnaires, one-act plays, actions songs, film shows, and puppetry, are some of the methods used to disseminate the message of unity and peace.

The inter-religious activities are mainly conducted for college students especially in the B.Ed colleges in Goa. There are a few seminars and input sessions conducted for teachers at the college or

high school level. The reason behind targeting the college students is that they are mature enough to evaluate and understand the seriousness of the topics presented by the Cell. Most of the college students also take up public responsibilities after the degree course. They are the leaders of tomorrow and at this crucial juncture it is good to instill in them the attitudes of harmony, peace and unity.

The Activities

Inter-religious Dialogue Cell is busy throughout the year organizing different programmes. I may not be able to write down in detail all the activities since we are involved in a variety of programmes. Various Dialogue groups in India also conduct most of these activities; therefore they are not extraordinary but widespread. The following are some of the activities of Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell - Pilar:

1. Live-in programme

The Inter-religious Dialogue Cell conducts *live-in* programmes, for those who want to spread the message of harmony in the society. People of different faiths participate in the *live-in* by having common meal, recreation, talks, sharing, etc. Every participant contributes to the programme by sharing views and opinions about harmony among religions. The Cell also conducts *live-in* programmes for college teachers and students. The participants enjoy being together as one family of God and they express to have more such experiences of oneness.

2. Common celebrations and festivals.

In India we have various festivals and celebrations, which express our faith in God as well as gratitude to God for his care and protection. Some of these festivals indicate the change of seasons. The festivals and celebrations are also an occasion for the people to come together and strengthen the bonds of unity and relationship. On the occasion of religious festivals, the students of the Pilar Theological College make every effort to visit the homes and greet the people of other faiths. This is done specially during Ganesh Chaturti, Diwali, Christmas and Id-Ul-Fitr. The team of Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell takes part in such festivals by visiting the homes, wishing people and

devotedly joining in their celebration. As a public manifestation of our oneness, the “Harvest Festival” is celebrated with the hope of setting a tradition of our common heritage.

3. Christmas for Dialogue:

Christmas for dialogue is a special programme organized by the Inter Religious Dialogue Cell, Pilar. This is normally conducted on a Sunday before Christmas. People from the neighboring villages, especially children from neighboring schools, are invited. Children from each of this neighboring schools as well as the people from villages present items based on a prearranged theme, which is associated to Christmas. After the two hours of thought provoking and message filled programme, the gathering takes part in a fellowship party where Christmas sweets are served. The sweets are prepared by the students of theology themselves. In fact, this day is organized as a culmination of Inter-Religious dialogue activities of the Cell, presenting the birth of Jesus as the embodiment of divine – human dialogue and model for Inter-religious Dialogue.

4. Inter-religious sessions for college students

Every Saturday, the team visits one of the degree colleges in Goa to conduct an inter-religious dialogue programme. This mainly consists of teaching and singing Bhajans, talks by the resource persons of different faiths, mime show, puppetry, skit, action songs, interactive sessions and projecting the film “*Ekta Sandesh*”. The participants present offhand programmes like patriotic songs, inspiring skits and short talks. The input sessions are an invitation to the participants to relive the original experiences of the founders and Gurus of their religion. This programme helps the college students to unearth the message of harmony and peace. This way they are trained to promote the harmonious co-existence of different religions in their daily interactions.

5. Input sessions for teachers

One of the activities of the cell is to train teachers to be dialogical particularly in their interaction with the students of various faiths in the classroom as well as outside. Every year, a day long input session

is conducted for the teachers at the request of the college and school principals. Such sessions instill in the teachers an attitude of being open towards other faiths and being strongly rooted in their own. Interactive methodology is used to conduct different sessions during this programme.

6. "Inter-religious spiritual experience"

Selected persons, who are interested to have a spiritual experience, join this session and spend a day together to pray, meditate and share their spiritual experiences with one another. Inter-religious spiritual experiences have been well appreciated especially to realize that though we belong to different faiths yet we can be together for prayer, not just in a spirit of tolerance or adjustment but in genuine communion of hearts. This year the theme of the one-day Inter faith Spiritual experience is "Feel the World and Heal the World".

7. Course on 'Introduction to Religions'

A course on introduction to religions is conducted for college students and teachers who are interested to know about Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam and Christianity. Though the Christian seminaries and few universities have this course as part of their syllabus, we focus on the practical and dialogical perspective of religions. This course introduces basically different religions: founders and sages, scriptures and main teachings, festivals and worship patterns. As we are aware, one of the reasons for religious intolerance is lack of knowledge and understanding about the other religions. This course specially designed for college students and teachers, helps them to get rid of bias and prejudices about the other faiths.

8. Competitions

Poetry, essay, short-story writing and painting competitions are held based on an inter-religious theme. This is organized for the school and college students. This is to instill in the young minds the spirit of harmony and respect for the other faiths. It is also an opportunity for the students to express and refine their thoughts on harmony and unity.

9. Leaflets/booklets and posters.

There are a few leaflets and hymn booklets printed to facilitate better organization of Inter-religious Sessions. These literatures contain quotation from the scriptures of different religions and sayings of different Gurus, as well prayers and hymns of a non-sectarian nature. These leaflets and booklets are distributed among the participants during the sessions. They are encouraged to keep them in view of their use in the colleges later. These literatures facilitate the colleges to conduct such Inter-religious Sessions on their own.

Formation

Jesus says: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19: 19). We tend to define the boundary of our neighborhood in terms of affiliation to our religious, cultural and lingual groups. This unconscious or sometimes conscious over-attachment to persons of our own language, culture, religion limits our interaction with the neighbors. The Inter-Religious Dialogue Cell trains students of theology, college students and teachers as well as the participants of different sessions to widen the boundary of the neighborhood and go beyond the ghetto mentality.

Jesus asks us to ‘treat others as we would like others to treat us’. (Luke 6:31). This is another thrust of our inter-religious dialogue activities. As we reflect on these words of Jesus, the students are taught ‘not to reject anything that is true and holy in other religions, and to acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among other faiths, also in their social life and culture’ (Vat. II, NA 2).

The entire venture of inter-religious dialogue is carried out to achieve the objectives mentioned above. One of the objectives is to train the future missionaries to be dialogical and thus to promote harmony and peace in their ministry. The basic question, which we ask in this context is: are we training our future missionaries for the 2.3% Christians of the population of India or for the 100% of the population? Inadvertently most of the courses in our theological studies seem to focus only on Christian population even neglecting the 97.7% of India’s population that professes other faiths.

The Society of the Missionaries of St. Francis Xavier is an indigenous Society. The members work mainly among the tribals in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Nagar-Haveli, Gujarat, Bihar, Jharkhand, the Northeast States, Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and a few other states of India. Invariably the Pilar Fathers encounter more people of other faiths than Christians. Keeping this situation of the mission in mind, the training of the Pilar students gives sufficient emphasis to deal with the pluralistic context of India.

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Dialogue in the Areas of Jnana, Bhakti, Karma

Bandhu Ishanand Vempeny

Bandhu Isanand Vempeny SJ writes challenging articles on inter-religious harmony in Gujarati and English and is involved in peoples' movements promoting a culture of harmony.

Faith is an Experience of Relationship

As I begin this article an incident which took place some 45 years ago comes to my mind. It was a sort of confirmation of my basic, albeit unarticulated, attitudes towards the Non-Christian Religions. It happened when I was a Jesuit Scholastic beginning my studies in philosophy.

I was explaining the ideal, today axiomatically accepted, that *to be religious means to be inter-religious* in a situation of religious pluralism as in India, to the candidates for the National Defense Academy in Kadakavasala, Pune. During our discussion the question of Christian proselytism cropped up. One of the students stood up and said: "My mother may be ill-mannered and ugly, but no other person can be her adequate substitute. Hinduism is my mother. Missionaries seem to insist that we should get converted to Christianity abandoning Hinduism". How shall we interpret such a standpoint?

The student admits that his mother, in the eyes even of an 'impartial' observer, may be ill-mannered and ugly. But his filial commitment establishes an irreplaceable relation between him and her, and his filial love makes him see her imperfections in a very different light

from that of the outsiders. He therefore wants others to know, that unless they understand and experience from his own point of view, they would not be able to appreciate what his religion means to him.

God loves all

Almost a quarter of a century ago I was attending a seminar on Christian Fundamentalism in Manila. There took place a panel discussion by five Christians belonging to different fundamentalist groups like the Navigators of the Lord, Christian Campus Crusade, Crusaders for World Conquest, etc. All of them propounded the ideal that only those who have been baptized through the Holy Spirit and have had the experience of having been born again could attain eternal salvation. According to them not only the Non-Christians but also the Christians of the Main Line Churches will perish eternally. Since the seminar was organized by Catholics they made an effort to find some *loopholes* for the salvation of some of the Catholics.

When I asked them whether they believed that the Christian God is a God of love, two of them with many Biblical quotations tried to show me that He is Love Itself. I told them bluntly that in spite of their quotations, the God whom they believed in, is very much like the devil about whom I had read a lot in the Christian literature. In spite of the uproar, shouting in the top of their voices, “blasphemy, blasphemy!” I managed to put in the following words, when silence was restored:

“You say that God created, as an expression of His love, the whole of humanity within the universe. But this God gleefully watches daily more than one and a half billion Christians of the main line Churches move towards eternal damnation. Similarly he watches with no particular concern or interest almost one and a quarter billion Muslims, 1.3 billion Chinese and some 800 million Hindus, many other millions of Buddhists and members of other religions, move towards eternal hell. He is sadistically cruel in watching the eternal torture and pain of his creatures when he could have stopped this terrifying situation. The attributes of sadistic cruelty, supernatural power without the will to help the hell-bound, hapless billions, and unwise decisions

with regard to the running of the world without even a faint ray of love, belong to my concept of the devil”.

These two incidents confirmed some of my inherited, albeit unarticulated, views and attitudes, with regard to my approach to the Non-Christian religions. Among these I give special importance to the following three: (i) Our approach to the religions other than Christian should be that of great reverence and love as we approach the mother of an intimate friend. (ii) The basis for our approach to these religions is ‘*Abba-experience*’ which implies our deep faith in a God of love and our brotherly\sisterly love and commitment for all human beings. (iii) God’s interest and concern for the salvation of all human beings is much more than that of any zealous missionary.

I shall mention some of my inter-religious involvements in a framework different from the ones which are currently used like “dialogue of life”, “dialogue of worship”, etc. I shall use a thought-pattern well-known in the Hindu tradition, namely *jnana*, *bhakti* and *karma* catering respectively to the cognitive, affective and conative faculties of man. To keep the article within limits I shall just enumerate some of my involvements.

Dialogue at the Level of *Jnana*

Here I shall give a list of some of my dialogue oriented books and articles in English, except for a few in Gujarati.

Books: 1) *Inspiration in Non-Biblical Scriptures* (1973). 2) *Neo-Gandhian Second Liberation Revolutionary Front* (1974). 3) *Krisna and Christ* (1988). 4) *Conversion* (1999). 5) *Conversion and Missionary* (2000). 6) *Raw Materials for an Indian Theology* (2008).

Articles: Most of my articles (above 200) in English, Gujarati and Malayalam (in the Christian, Non-Christian and Secular Periodicals and collections of Research Papers) were meant to promote inter-religious dialogue. Here just a few samples are given:

1) “Indian Secularism as Dialogal Religiosity” in *Church in India*: (1991), and its abridged version in *The Times of India*, Ahmedabad: 02-11-1990. 2) “Non-Biblical Scriptures in Christian Worship” in *Sharing Worship* (1988). 3) “The Flute and the Cross” published by

Goa University and its abridged version in *Shabda, Shakti, Sangam* (1995). 4) "Vipasana, A Buddhist Form of Meditation" in *Praying Seminar* (1975). 5) "National Integration" in *Reflections for the New Millennium* (2000). 6) My two papers, one on "Conversion" and the other "*Christ's Kingdom Ideal and the World Family Ideal*" soon to be published by the HRD Ministry for the volume on Religions for the Encyclopedia series on Science, Religion and History. 7) "Dialogal Methodology Illustrated by Caste System" *Jeevadhara* (1973). 8) The most widely circulated Gujarati Daily "*Divya Bhaskar*" has already published some 13 essays on Christ and Church explained in a dialogal way.

Lectures (in English and Gujarati): 1) *Dharma Samsthapana* in terms of the Kingdom of God Ideal to the Reliance Executives. 2) *Management-Labour Sharing in the Bible and in the Gita* to the members of the Management of Association of India. 3) *Lok-sangraha through Niskama-karma-yoga* during the Mini-Kumbha Mela in Ahmedabad. 4) "*Theology of Non-Christian Scriptures*" in Rome for the International Conference of Scriptures Scholars (2002). 5) "*Dialogal Way of Facing Religious Fundamentalism*" in Manila (1990). 6) "*The Kingdom of God Ideal interpreted in terms of the Shariat*" in Malaysia (1990). 7) "*Avatara in Indian Christology*" in Jerusalem (2000).

Dialogue at the Level of *Bhakti*

I have been giving several talks on the festivals and saints of India in the Christian and other institutions, prayer services during various religious and national festivals in the spirit of dialogue. I was one of the founding members of the De Nobili College - Indology group which introduced the Indian Rite Mass in the sixties. I conducted inter-faith prayer meetings in various ashrams especially in the Gandhi Ashrams, in educational institutions and in hospitals. I guided pilgrimages in inter-religious groups to religious centres like Pandharpur in Maharashtra, Girnar in Gujarat, Dargah Sharief of Ajmer in Rajasthan, Shabarimala in Kerala, Rishikesh in Uttarakhand, Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, and the like.

Dialogue at the Level of *Karma*

1) Neo-Gandhian Second Liberation Revolutionary Front: An inter-religious and inter-caste movement for social harmony and economic self-sufficiency. 2) Ram-Rahim Nagar (Ahmedabad): It functions as an oasis of peace and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims (40%-60% respectively) from the time of Independence though it is near Jamalpur-Behrampura area, notorious for communal riots. After a close study of the area and after publishing a few things about this area some efforts were made to multiply "*Ram-Rahim Nagars*" in Ahmedabad and in other cities.

3) Sadbhavana Din: A whole day of panel discussions, group discussions, friendly chats, common meals, etc. in Ahmedabad and in Vadodara. Programmes conducted in Gujarati and Hindi. Participants were not English speaking liberal people but scholars belonging to different groups of the *Sangh Parivar*, heads of religious institutions and Muslim scholars from *Jamat-E-Islami* and other Muslim associations. In one of such meetings Dr. Togadia the Secretary General of the VHP gave a very provocative speech.

4) Staying in Ashrams and Madrasas: Very often I stayed in these institutions with theology students who had been staying there for a week at least. Such stay-together programmes gave to us very positive views of the various sects of the World Religions.

5) Inter-Religious Relief Services: These were organized by others (Christian and other religions, NGOs and Governmental Agencies). Though I took part in many of them, my part either in organizing or in carrying on the projects was very limited.

Approaching Religions from Within

The question of the candidate for the Defense Academy can very well illustrate this point. For him Hinduism is his mother. For a non-Hindu to know Hinduism truly he/she must enter within and view it.

The points of view of a bio-chemist *qua* bio-chemist, of a stranger *qua* stranger, a friendly neighbour *qua* friendly neighbour, and the son *qua* son with regard to this woman who is the mother of the

student, are qualitatively different. Just as no woman exists except as a daughter, mother, wife, sister and the like, so too, no religion exists except as something to which persons are committed (For a deeper study Cfr. Dr. Raimund Panikkar, *The Trinity and World Religions*, p.1 ff).

Dialogal Liberation

After Vat. II, 'Dialogue' became the watchword among the missiologists and missionaries in India. Christian ashrams began to emerge in different parts of India, Christian *sanyasis* clad in saffron, began to make their presence felt in the ecclesiastical circles, and Hindu religious symbols and non-Christian Scriptures began to make inroads into Christian liturgy. There began a new movement in the seventies of the twentieth century under the name *Liberation Theology* with its slogans of "option for the poor", "grass-root level involvements" and "structural transformation". Under the influence of this theology the people involved in the inter-religious dialogue began to get marginalized.

There were ideological struggles between those involved in inter-religious dialogue and those committed to liberation pursuits. Those of the liberation thrust pointed out that a religion which does not care for the fundamental needs of the people, will work as opium and will degenerate into ritualism and fundamentalism. Those engaged in dialogue argued that the Christians in India are just drops in the mighty ocean of more than a billion people; if any worthwhile liberation of the oppressed people has to be achieved, it has to be in dialogue and cooperation with the members of other religions. Besides, they pointed out that every religion has a liberative potential. After much sword-crossing, there emerged the formula: Any meaningful dialogue has to be liberational and any meaningful liberation has to be dialogal.

Re-reading the Scriptures

Some time back, I had the privilege of taking part in an international seminar in Bangalore organized by a group of secular persons from different parts of the world. One of the main topics of this seminar was *The Humane Face of Socially Engaged Hinduism*. The participants including those from the West, were well aware of the

common and uncritical understanding of Hinduism, on account of its belief in *sanchit karma*: Hinduism is a religion with no concern for the sufferings and miseries of fellow human beings, be it poverty, disease or caste-discrimination; people would suffer for the just punishment for their sins of the previous birth; hence others would have no serious responsibility for trying to alleviate their sufferings.

Not only the Hindu participants but also others felt that such views were downright exaggerations. All the same, most were aware of the grain of truth in these assumptions. During the reading of a number of scholarly papers and during the discussions that followed, we could come across a number of texts from the Hindu Scriptures and a number of Hindu traditions, rituals, festivals, etc. which showed the deeply compassionate face of Hinduism. Here we had the experience of what the Liberation Theologians call “hermeneutical suspicion and re-reading the Scriptures from the context”.

Abba-experience as the Basis of Dialogue

The basis of Christian faith is the experience of God as love (1 Jn 4: 8 & 16), as an unconditionally loving Father (Lk 15), and all humans as brothers and sisters (Mt 23:8 and 9). This experience of varying degrees of intensity and depth is called *Abba-experience* by the Biblical Scholars. Departing totally from the Jewish awe and dread of God, Christ called God *Abbo* (Mk 14: 36), the Aramaic word with which little children addressed their fathers, similar to the English word *daddy*. Jesus wanted His disciples too to address God by this name (Mt 6: 9-14. cfr. Rom 8:15-17 and Gal 4: 5-7). This experience can easily lead one to love all humans as one’s brothers and sisters. It is in this sense St. John said: “If God has loved us so much we should love one another” (1 Jn 4:11 and 19-21).

As I pointed out to the panelists in Manila, an exclusivistic and fundamentalist view of man’s salvation cuts this root of Christian faith. Often missionaries forget that God is far more interested than themselves in the salvation of all His children.

Interpreting the Kingdom of God Ideal in a Dialogal Way

Today hardly any theologian questions the position that the central message of Christ contains in the Kingdom of God ideal. It and its

equivalent words occur in the New Testament about 200 times. In the Indian context, especially in the Hindu context the *World Family Ideal* (*vasudhaivakudumbakam*) bears comparison with the Kingdom Ideal (cfr. Ishanand: *Raw Materials for an Indian Theology* "Christ's Central Message in the Indian Context" pp.111-161). It is of paramount importance for a missionary to 'preach' this central message of Christ after finding out its homological equivalents in the religions of his context.

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Prasanth, A Seed of Hope for Peace

Cedric Prakash

Gujarat has become a test case of aggressive communal politics in India. Cedric Prakash SJ describes how he and the Centre *Prasanth* get involved courageously in bringing about peace and justice in the lives of broken communities in Gujarat

Prasanth, Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace

On October 2nd, 2001, *Prasanth* (all pervasive peace), was inaugurated as a Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace. Belonging to the Gujarat Province of the Society of Jesus it is situated in Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of Gujarat, north-west India). Gujarat is best known as Mahatma Gandhi's birth place. He was born on October 2nd 1869 and spent some of the most important years of his life in the Sabarmati Ashram which he founded and from where he launched the "Quit India Movement". Gandhi gave to the world, the twin doctrine of "Satyagraha" (the force of Truth) and "Ahimsa" (Non-violence) – the latter based on the fundamental teaching of the Jain religion. It was therefore symbolic that Prasanth was born on October 2nd with the desire in some ways at least to imbibe the legacy left by Gandhi.

The vision of Prasanth is enshrined in the preamble of Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirms that the "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world."

The realization this vision is sought to be achieved through:

- * promoting Human Rights, Justice and Peace
- * taking sides with the poor and other marginalized groups with a special focus on tribals, dalits, women and children
- * ensuring that the mandate of the Society of Jesus, which is an atmosphere of faith that leads to justice, is present in all initiatives
- * emphasizing an integral approach to social development

The Gujarat Reality

In February/March 2002, in the wake of the Gujarat Carnage that engulfed several parts of Gujarat, and saw the brutal killings of hundreds of Muslims, Prasanth was deeply involved in helping to provide relief and rehabilitation to the victims. Ever since, it has become a hub for all kinds of activities / programmes which seek to highlight the horrors of the Gujarat Carnage, to help in small ways, provide justice to those affected, and above all, to be a bridge between the Hindus and Muslims of Gujarat.

For the past seven years, the focus has been to promote a society in which communal harmony and peace prevail. However, in a highly polarized society in which fascist and fundamentalist forces with their divisive agenda have a sway, this is easier said than done.

For most minorities, this is the reality of Gujarat today :

- * If one is a Muslim, one is necessarily confined to ghettos. In several towns and villages, Muslims have to live on the periphery. In Ahmedabad, they have to live in the poorer Eastern side of the city, with practically no possibility of owning a house or a shop in the Western upmarket part of the city.
- * State-sponsored terrorism continues with frightening regularity. In the past years, several Muslim youth have been killed in fake-police encounters. A top police official Vanzara is today serving a term in jail for killing a Muslim youth in a "fake encounter". However, most other police will go scot-free.
- * An insignificant incident or a petty scuffle can flare up into a communal riot in a matter of minutes.

- * Whenever some incident takes place (like the recent bomb blasts on July 26th 2008) an accusing finger always points towards the Muslim community.
- * Muslim youth are rounded up and even today years after the burning of the train in Godhra on February 27th 2002, several Muslims are still languishing in jail without any trial.
- * Signboards are put up in many cities and towns of the State calling it a “Hindu Rashtra” (Hindu nation). This is against the spirit and letter of the Constitution of India.
- * Since 1998, Christians have been on the receiving end in the State. Churches have been burnt / destroyed and Church personnel are attacked / harassed regularly.
- * With full Government patronage, Hindu fundamentalists have laid siege to the Dangs District in South Gujarat. The Christian population here is about 10%. A couple of years ago, a huge “Shabri Kumbh Mela” spewed vitriol on Christians and on the Missionaries.
- * Christians find it difficult to get official permissions from the Government whether it is to begin an educational institution or to build a Church.
- * Youth from minority communities are very subtly denied jobs in Government-run institutions and programmes.
- * The Freedom of Religion Law 2003 (the rules of which were framed five years later, only in April 2008), makes it mandatory to seek permission from the civil authority before one can change one’s religion.
- * There is a slew of “patrikas” (handbills / brochures) which make their way among the ordinary people. These “patrikas” are extremely virulent, demonizing the minorities, very specially the Muslims and Christians.
- * The Gujarat State School Textbook Board has published Textbooks which portray the minorities and the minority religions of India in very poor light.

The above are just some aspects of the Gujarat Reality. The picture is even bleaker. How then does one promote inter-religious

dialogue in an atmosphere which is extremely charged, divisive and prejudiced? How does one build bridges in a society which has become very polarized? There are no ready made solutions and as a Centre committed to peace and harmony, *Prasanth* does not believe in “cosmetic actions....”

Some concrete Interventions

Prasanth has been attempting some concrete interventions. These include :

1. to speak Truth to power

We are convinced that we will not be able to have a society which is tolerant, harmonious and peaceful if people in power (i.e. Government) and other vested interests, keep people divided, very specially in the name of religion.

In Gujarat, we have no other choice but to tell those in power, that what they are doing to the people (very specially the minorities), is wrong and unconstitutional. Through their very meticulous propaganda they instill hate and prejudice in one community against the other. We have been consistent in trying to expose the lies and the half-truths they indulge in; a propaganda that has a striking parallel with Hitler's regime.

Standing up to the powerful is not easy, because one is subject to all kinds of intimidations and harassment. However, when one is consistent and has nothing to fear, the slowly, one is able to see the emergence of a new Hope.

2. to study and analyze the situation

One cannot address the reality if one does not carefully study and analyze the situation and the forces that are at work. In *Prasanth* we have been doing it through systematic documentation of human rights violations which abound in the State. We have been trying to get to the root of the problem and see how best we can connect a particular “incident” either with the fascist / fundamentalist forces or with everyday reality of the people.

Careful social analysis does throw up several responses to the existing reality.

Over the years, we have also researched the Textbooks of Gujarat and highlighted the serious biases and prejudices that exist in them.

3. to publish documentation

Studying and analyzing the reality is not sufficient if one does not publish one's findings. We have been doing this through a series of spiral bound documents, printing books / documents of well-known authors on relevant topics and also printing appropriate patrikas on topical issues (cfr. "On Being Prepared").

Besides, we are also a clearing house for other publications produced by like-minded groups. Each of the publications, apart from having their own story to tell, provides deep insights and practical suggestions as to how one can positively respond to the Gujarat reality.

4. to communicate powerfully

One of the strong points of our Centre is our ability to constantly communicate what is happening in Gujarat. We do it through a variety of ways : through the internet (electronic bulletins, our blog, regular e-mails, through the books / documents we publish, through various talks and seminars – locally, nationally and even internationally). We realize that when we share our reality with others, when we communicate with them, the problems we face become much easier to handle.

The XVI CBCI General Body Meeting held in Trichur, Kerala from January 7th to 14th 2004, brought out a powerful Statement entitled "Called to be a Communicating Church". In that Statement (No. 6), the Bishops say "Jesus Christ came to communicate the fullness of life so that all could have "life, and have it in abundance" (Jn. 10:10). He was in constant communication with people. His success in communication depended on his personal witness. While proclaiming his message of love he, the ever compassionate Saviour, adapted it to suit the people, particularly the poor and the marginalized".

We are constantly communicating with the media, with ordinary people, with the powerful, with Governments, with Diplomatic representatives, in fact, with every strata of society.

5. to make common cause

Our many efforts will come to naught if we do not make Common Cause with other likeminded groups and individuals from civil society. We have therefore been networking and collaborating with people of different faiths and backgrounds at the grass root level and even at the level of policy. Working together with others helps in strengthening both, the initiative and the realization of our dreams. This is again, not easy, because individuals and groups also have their own agendas and other priorities. By and large, we have a general acceptance and have created a space for ourselves in a civil society movement which is in many ways, breaking the walls of hate and prejudice and building bridges of harmony and peace. Our Centre is also home to people of diverse religious traditions who feel comfortable and accepted here, in spite of the limited facilities we have. A part of our strategy is also to have volunteers who support the general thrust of our involvement and who readily give of their services as and when required.

6. to form men and women for others

Prasanth has also been providing regular Training Programmes and other exposures for people from all walks of life: to tribal balwadi teachers, to professionals, to NGO leaders and Human Rights activists. We have just launched a Programme on Human Rights and Peace Education for several Teachers across the State of Gujarat. We are also involved in an International initiative called "Interplay for Peace", which in many ways, breaks down the barriers which divide one another. Finally, we also have young students both from India and abroad who intern with us for a period of time; these are provided with adequate skills which in some ways, prepare them to face the many challenges which keep people divided in our world today.

7. to be rooted in spirituality

We do not hide from the fact that we are a Christian organization, deriving our inspiration and strength from the person, message and mission of Jesus Christ. Besides, we strive to realize in all our activities, the Jesuit Faith-Justice Mandate.

So, all our activities are tempered with a profound respect for other religions. We constantly use prayer, signs and symbols of other faiths. We always believe and put into practice the “Sarva Dharma” way of proceeding.

In just about seven years of its existence Prasanth as a Centre for Human Rights, Justice and Peace, has achieved a great deal. It is a Seed of Hope for Peace. Given our limitations, we have made a significant mark locally, nationally and internationally. Our shortcomings are plenty but we hope that over the years, we will try not merely to address them but also to overcome them. While we never flinch in our movement towards the ideal, we constantly pray in the words of our Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore :

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,

Where knowledge is free,

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls,

Where words come out from the depth of truth,

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection,

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sands of dead habit,

Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action,

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, lead my country awake !

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The Association of the Messengers of Peace and Harmony (MPH)

George Koovackal

George Koovackal CMI devoted his entire life to the promotion of dialogue, especially with the Muslims. He has recently initiated the *Association of the Messengers of Peace and Harmony* to form a group of committed ministers of dialogue.

Early Association with other Religions

‘My experiments with interreligious dialogue’ started as a young boy at my own home in Wayanad, Kerala. Hindus, Muslims and Christians were our neighbours and we lived as a well-knit inter-religious community. But as children we used to hear a lot of stories about conflicts and fights in the name of religions in other places. Many of such exaggerated incidents were mere fabricated stories meant to ridicule and insult the faith content and religious practices of other religions, especially of Muslims. As a Catholic boy I was firmly convinced that only Catholic Church is the true religion, since it was founded by Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and guided by His true followers till the present day. The main sources of my information were the lessons I learnt in my catechism classes, the homilies on Sundays and the stories from my own companions.

Muslim women and men came to work for us at home and I used to watch them with great curiosity and got interested in their special dialect called ‘Mappila Malayalam’, and their food habits, dress and also their attitudes towards their women. On my long way to school,

I could see how the Muslim children were brought up in Madrasas. Some of my best friends in the school were Muslims. However, my over-all impression about them was not very positive. My tendency was to look at them as extremely legalistic, unclean, communal minded, exploitative in business matters and non-patriotic. Many of them were regular for their prayers and strict in observing their Ramadan Fasting. But in actual life I noticed that they were unaffected by their religiosity and practices.

Study of Islam

I started my theological studies at Dharmaram College in 1969 with these preconceived ideas and misunderstandings about Muslims. It was a period immediately after the Second Vatican Council. The positive attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions was very much alive in the minds and hearts of people all over the world. Dharmaram College with its special emphasis on Indian Theology and inter-religious dialogue started a Center for the Study of World Religions and I was appointed its secretary. With the active support of the college, we organized a series of lectures on Sundays for those outside the campus. Hundreds of participants belonging to different religions attended the regular courses. An interaction with those students and scholars of other religions helped me to know more about their religions and also to appreciate the positive values in them.

My encounter with the people of other faith persuaded me to dedicate my life to promote Peace and Communal Harmony in India through inter-religious studies, dialogue and collaboration. When I looked around, I could find a lot of Christians specialized in Hinduism and Hindu-Christian dialogue. But I could hardly find any Catholic who has undergone some specialized studies on Muslims. This gave me a challenging task. During my theological studies I spent a lot of time learning Arabic and Islam. After my priestly ordination and pastoral training I was sent to Aligarh Muslim University to specialize in Islamic studies. During this period I was called to teach Islam in

several major seminaries. I was assigned to write my M.Phil dissertation on the Henry-Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies, Hyderabad. This gave me an opportunity to stay at the Institute and also to make use of the library, perhaps the best in India for Islamic studies. Besides, I was appointed an associate member of the teaching staff and so I could conduct courses on Islam in many parts of India along with the senior teachers. In September 1984, I defended my thesis, 'Christian Studies of Islam in India'. I was perhaps the first non-Muslim in Asia to hold a Doctorate degree in Islamic studies. I was soon appointed Director of Chavara Cultural Centre, Cochin, Kerala. Here I was provided with ample opportunity to interact with a lot of dialogue partners and also to conduct several inter-religious programs.

Secretary at the Church Offices

In November 1984, I was appointed the Secretary of the Dialogue Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) at its head quarters in Delhi. So I had to travel extensively throughout India visiting and encouraging individuals, groups, societies and centers involved in promoting inter-religious dialogue. I was responsible for organizing Pope John Paul II's meeting with the leaders and the representatives of various religions in Chennai in 1986. The Vatican entourage appreciated this program very much and that became one of the reasons for my appointment at the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue in Vatican as the Secretary of Asian Region's Desk. Working at the Vatican was a wonderful experience for me since I could feel the official attitude of the Church towards the followers of other religions.. I was also in touch with the dialogue partners and their activities throughout the world. I realized that though the promotion of inter-religious dialogue is one of the most important ministries of the Church in the world, the Christians as a whole are not very much interested in and committed to this ministry due to various factors. One of the reasons for this is the lack of well trained and dedicated personnel for this ministry. Hence, I tried to initiate an integral training program as part of the formation in ecclesiastical

universities and institutions in Rome. However, this project could not take off since I did not get support from the Church authorities.

While working at the Vatican, I joined the Gregorian University, Rome, to do my second Doctorate in Hinduism and completed all the formalities and prepared my doctoral dissertation on Bakthi Yoga According to Swami Vivekananda. As I was asked to return to India by my religious superiors I came back to Bangalore in 1993. Meanwhile I was appointed Executive Secretary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), Commission for Inter-religious Dialogue at its office in Bangkok. Similarly I was also appointed secretary of the CBCI Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism. However, I could not accept both these appointments since my superiors wanted my service at Dharmaram College.

I started my teaching career at Dharmaram and soon I was appointed Director of the Center the Study of World Religions there. Once again, I got a chance to conduct various programs in collaboration with other dialogue groups and centers in India. I was also instrumental to start a Movement for Inter-religious Understanding and Harmony (MIRUH) at the city YMCA Bangalore. Since the YMCA was very much interested and involved in dialogue activities, we could organize many programs such as, Harmony Camps, Cultural and Games Competitions, Training Programs for Teachers and Students, Inter-religious Pilgrimages, Celebration of Festivals, Prayer Meetings on important occasions, etc.

Towards a New Movement

Formation for dialogue has been my most cherished dream project. At the end of 1996, I thought of starting a new Association of Catholic Priests and Brothers, called 'Messengers of Peace and Harmony'. I prepared a small write-up on this project, and consulted many pioneers working in the field of dialogue. I was encouraged very much by many people including Archbishop Kuriakose Kunnacherry, the then Chairman of the CBCI Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism. When consulted, Very Rev.Fr. Thomas Mampara, the Prior General

of our Congregation, expressed great appreciation for the Project and relieved me from the teaching job at Dharmaram so that I may be totally involved in this project.

I am fully convinced that the best form of inter-religious dialogue is practiced among the mystics. A mystic is the one who has transcended the barriers of religions and all worldly attachments. Being intimately united with the Divine, these holy men and women are the best witnesses and proclaimers of the Reign of God on earth. We may find such people in all religious traditions. So I thought of establishing an Inter-religious Spirituality Center to learn, practice and teach the meditation methods of all religions, especially for the formators. A generous Catholic gave us a suitable land in Wayanad, Kerala, for this purpose. By this time two more priests, Fr. Leo Pottackal and Fr. Augustin Puthenpura joined me and we got our society registered under the name: 'Messengers of Peace and Harmony'. As things were moving towards taking some concrete shape, legal problems started coming up. Since we were planning for a society of priests, we have to be approved by a bishop and so we were looking for a patron bishop. Mar Baselios, the then bishop of Bathery encouraged our initiatives. But he was transferred to Trivandrum and other ritual problems came on our way. Finally Mar Dominic Kokkat, the bishop of Gorakhpur, UP, kindly accepted our requests to be our patron. So I went there in 1997 and stayed with him for two years. With the blessings of the bishop we started there an 'Inter-religious Association for Peace and Harmony' and organized many programs.

I soon realized that Gorakhpur was not an ideal place for our ministry and so we approached His Grace Alan De Lastic, the late Archbishop of Delhi. He cordially welcomed us and so I moved from Gorakhpur to Delhi in 1999. Finally on April 8, 1999, the Association

1 The *Annuario Pontificio* (Vatican, 2004, pp 8-15) lists about ten popes who resigned or were deposed.

of the Messengers of Peace and Harmony was inaugurated as a Catholic Association of Priests and Brothers in the Archdiocese of Delhi and we initiated several programs in collaboration with the CBCI Commission for Dialogue and also with other groups involved in dialogue ministry. Meanwhile, Fr. John Kattuparambil also joined me and we set up our own office in Faridabad, near Delhi. The Church laws continued to taunt us with regard to the problem of incardination. We referred the matter to Vatican and as directed by the Congregation for the Consecrated Life, His Grace Vincent M. Concessao, the Archbishop of Delhi, erected the MPH as a 'Pious Association of the Faithful' on 23rd June 2006. The priest members are granted provisional incardination into the Archdiocese of Delhi, with the provision to maintain their incardination to their own original diocese or religious institutes. It may become a full-pledged *religious society* when it will have more than 40 members and the infrastructures required to fulfill the demands of the canon law.

The Charism of the "Messengers of Peace and Harmony" (MPH)

The social, religious, cultural and political situations in India today, especially the growth of religious fanaticism and terrorism, call for a new approach to communal harmony, national integration, environmental protection, preservation of peace and prosperity as well as the promotion of moral, spiritual and secular values of our motherland. Followers of all religious traditions and even people with no religious affiliation have to join hands to preserve and promote our rich spiritual and cultural heritage and fight against the narrow minded fundamentalists found in all religions.

The Catholic Church in her attempt to foster a more positive attitude and relationship with believers of all faiths, including those of

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- 2 How powerful the European powers were may be gauged from the fact that Elizabeth, wife of Philip V king of Spain, appointed her 9-year old son archbishop of Toledo, while the pope was helpless. P.C. Thomas, *A Compact History of the Popes*, St Paul's, Bombay, 1994, p 158.

the tribal religions and atheists, has asked the faithful through the Decrees of the Second Vatican Council, subsequent Church Documents and the inspiring discourses of the recent Popes and studies of religious thinkers to enter prudently and lovingly into dialogue with the followers of other religions. Similar attempts have been made by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and other Church bodies and organizations. But unfortunately people at large are not sufficiently informed and aware of these new teachings and commitments of the Church in the field of inter-religious dialogue and collaboration. We may find many individuals, centers and organizations actively involved in promoting peace and religious harmony in India. But due to lack of well trained and committed persons, the peace and reconciliation ministry has not become a major concern for the Church in India. There does not seem to exist anywhere in the world a system or an institute that gives an integral and serious training in the theory and practice of inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism. Hence, there is a felt need of a well trained and dedicated group of people to take up this challenging and urgent mission of preparing people of all religions to live in peace and harmony through the practice of dialogue and collaboration.

The MPH has a unique charism, i.e., the formation of the followers of all religions for inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism through the presence and activities of a well trained and dedicated group of people. In this sense the MPH is perhaps the first religious society in the Church that has taken up this as its primary charism. However, it may take up other activities also related to its charism for its survival and efficient functioning.

Formation for dialogue is the goal of MPH. More precisely it is to prepare the followers of all religions to live in peace and in harmony in our present day context of religious pluralism. In this approach the MPH does not advocate a new theology of dialogue but only tries to communicate effectively what has been mentioned in the Bible and other Sacred Scriptures, official documents of the Church and the present theological investigations.

Unity in Spirituality

Our basic theological premise is that there is only one God and God is the creator and protector of all. As children of one and the same God we are all brothers and sisters though we belong to various religious traditions. Our affiliation to a particular religion is not in fact a matter of our personal choice. We were born as members of different religions. At the same time, we enjoy the freedom to change our religions, if that is beneficial to our spiritual advancement and integral growth. We condemn all attempts to impose one's religion on others. Faith in God unites us but our understanding of God and our ways to approach him are different. It is God who saves us and the religions are there only to help us to reach him. There is a basic unity in spirituality within the diversity of religions. Religiosity based on rituals and traditions has to take diverse forms. We do not subscribe to the view that all religions are equal. But we believe that every religion is unique and it is a way of life for its followers. Every religion has something unique to contribute to humanity as a whole: its noble spiritual values. In the course of time unethical practices coming from human greed, pride, jealousy, ignorance, misunderstandings and selfishness also crept into the sacred landscape of religions; these are the negative elements. Through the process of genuine inter-religious dialogue these negative elements have to be eliminated. But these efforts should come from within each community, since outside attempts may be interpreted as unnecessary interferences and violations of their rights.

Hence, the religious leaders and scholars have to play the most important role in promoting Peace and Harmony through dialogue and collaboration. First of all they should know their own religion well and become genuine followers of its original inspiration with openness, love and sympathy towards the followers of other faiths. Secondly, they should study other religions prevalent in their places with sincerity and objectivity. In collaboration with the partners in other faiths, efforts should be made to preserve, promote, appreciate and assimilate the positive values found in all religious traditions and make use of them for the development of peace and prosperity.

I have taken several initiatives to promote peace and communal harmony. Some have failed and some are partially successful. But my greatest life ambition is formation for dialogue. It is with this desire I have taken the initiative to start the Association called Messengers of Peace and Harmony. We envisage two types of members- Life members and Associate members. Since the MPH in future may become a religious community we can have only priests and brothers as life members. But the associate membership is open to people of all faiths, male or female, if they are willing to cooperate with the life members in their attempt to have a peaceful community. The number of life members will be small. But we would like to have a large number of associate members throughout the world who, in collaboration with the life members, will be taking the message of peace and harmony to all sections of society through the practice of dialogue of life. Thus, we hope that our efforts to become peace-makers according to the mind of Jesus and the Church will produce some changes in our society. In short, MPH is a small and new group of priests and brothers trained and dedicated to establish peace and communal harmony through the practice of 'the way of knowledge, devotion and action' (*jnana marga, bhakti marga, and karma marga*).

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Christian – Muslim Dialogue in India at a Glance

Paul Jackson

Paul Jackson SJ is a well known Christian scholar on Islam. He offers here a short survey of Christian-Muslim dialogue in India. Keenly aware of the tensions and prejudices involved in Christian-Muslim relations he explores an authentic way of dialogue with the Muslims.

The Challenge of the Muslims

Due to unavoidable circumstances, this is a last-minute 'glance' – and no more – at Christian-Muslim dialogue in India. It is helpful to remember that during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there was a great deal of Protestant-Muslim interaction – a more appropriate word than 'dialogue' – especially in North India. Large Protestant communities from a Muslim background, in cities such as Lucknow and Allahabad, bear testimony to this. The number of bishops in the Church of North India with Muslim names is a further indication of the impact of this interaction. The Henry Martyn Institute in Hyderabad is a tangible reminder of the ongoing Protestant involvement, with a special focus nowadays on reconciliation.

Catholics had a head start on Protestants through the Jesuit Mission to Akbar's Court, beginning in 1580, but any form of notable interaction after the suppression of the Society of Jesus late in the eighteenth century is hard to come by. In Independent India Fr. Victor Courtois S.J. almost single-handedly engaged in genuine dialogue with Muslims until his sudden death in 1960.

The Catholic Response

The response of the Catholic Church in India to the challenges posed by Vatican II got under way in a Seminar held in Bangalore in 1969. The need to reach out to Muslims in India was clearly expressed. The next All-India meeting was held in Patna in 1973. A whole workshop was devoted to interaction with Muslims. The recommendations were included in the section on dialogue, which was principally devoted to dialogue with Hindus. Some commendable work began in South India. Sr. Fatima I.C.M. and Sr. Leelamma, F.M.M. were sent to Rome to study Islam. In North India Fr. Christian Troll, S.J. convened a meeting of Jesuits in 1977 which resulted in the formation of JAMI – Jesuit Apostolate Among Muslims in India – and the publication of *JAMI Notes*, reminiscent of *Notes on Islam*, which Fr. Courtois had published from 1947 until his death in 1960.

In March 1979 Fr. Albert Nambiaparambil C.M.I., Secretary of the Dialogue Commission, organized a Consultation on Dialogue with Muslims. Archbishop Dominic Athaide generously hosted this All-India meeting in Agra. The group realized the importance of electing a core group to see that something was actually done as a result of the Consultation. Five people were elected. They, in turn, chose Fr. Terence Farias, S.J. as their Secretary. The Consultation was fully reported in a Zero number of *Jami Notes*, which thereafter became the mouthpiece of the new group. In 1983 the name was changed to *Salaam*. Currently (2008) it is in its 29th volume. The group also changed its name in 1983 from “Association for Islamic Studies” to “Islamic Studies Association” (ISA). Through *Salaam* and its other publications, the Conventions it organizes every two years, the teaching, writing and other work of its present and erstwhile members, the Islamic Studies Association has made a notable contribution to “promote understanding” as the subtitle of *Salaam* proclaims.

On the other hand, when we consider the fact that there are some 140 million Muslims in India, the actual Catholic engagement seems to pale almost into insignificance. Many Catholics want to know if there is any comparable effort to engage in dialogue from the Muslim

side. In general, on the Indian scene, if we approach Muslims with proposals for various types of programmes, we meet with a generous response. Muslim initiatives, however, are rare. It is in this context that the importance of *A Common Word between Us and You*, an open letter originally sent by 138 Muslim religious leaders and scholars to Pope Benedict and other Christian leaders in 2007, assumes great significance. It opens up avenues for discussion. In itself it is an 'ecumenical' Islamic document, for its signatories are from a wide range of sectarian backgrounds, as well as from diverse geographical locations. More people have since added their signatures to the document, and much discussion has occurred on the basis of the letter. This is a very encouraging development.

The Obstacles

Nevertheless, Christian-Muslim dialogue in India faces many obstacles. World events are beyond our control, but they have impact on our lives. For example, the invasion of Iraq is often portrayed as a new Christian crusade against Muslims. Even though Pope John Paul II had spoken out clearly against the invasion, as had millions of demonstrators across the world, a number of Muslims think along these lines. This tends to *colour* their attitude to Christians in general, just as acts of terrorism and the activities of Muslim suicide bombers tend to *colour* Christians' attitude towards Muslims in general.

There is no need to dilate upon the Indian scene. With some notable exceptions, such as articles in *Tehelka* and *Communalism Combat*, the media portrayal of Muslims in India tends to focus on Muslims as terrorists. In such an atmosphere is it to be wondered at that even young, modern Muslim professionals often find it hard to rent a flat in Delhi or Mumbai?

More than Reciprocity

As already noted, the Catholic Church has changed greatly as a consequence of Vatican II. The attitude of Muslims in India is more in the mould of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church which, conscious of possessing "the true faith", saw no need for dialogue with members

of other religious entities, such as Muslims. A knowledge of history helps broaden our perspective. For example, Pope John Paul II repeatedly called for a total ban on capital punishment, yet the Inquisition had no compunction about burning 'heretics' at the stake.

Reciprocity is the basis for diplomatic relations between nations, but not for inter-religious dialogue. Jesus said: "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?" (Mt.5:47) His mandate is: "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect!" (Mt. 5:48) His sunshine and rain are for all, not merely for a select few.

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Krist Bhakta Movement, Its Origin and Dynamics

Anil Dev

Inter-faith dialogue involves authentic faith-sharing. The Christian dialogue partner has to share his/her faith in Christ in a non-aggressive way, well-based on authentic sources and basically open to the movements of the divine Spirit in human hearts. This means a new way of sharing the message of Christ in the pluralistic society of India. Anil Dev IMS has been experimenting with a new language in sharing the Gospel in the process of inter-faith encounter. The emerging phenomenon of *Krist-bhaktas* could be a pointer to a possible way of being a follower of Christ in India.

Varanasi, the Light of India

Varanasi, for ages known as Kashi, is the citadel of Hindu faith. The name Kashi comes from the root word in Sanskrit 'Kash', which means 'light'. With its religio-cultural and educational significance Varanasi still remains the 'light of India', attracting lakhs of pilgrims and tourists from all over the world. This oldest-living city of the world, situated at the bank of the holy river Ganges, in splendid majesty, still claims to be the religious capital of India and has sanctified many great philosophers like the Aadi Shankaracharya and Bhakti-poets like Tulsi Das, Kabir Das and Sur Das.

It was in November 1941 that Fr. Gasper A. Pinto, the founder of the Indian Missionary Society (IMS) landed in Varanasi. Inspired by the SVD Missionaries of Indore and responding to the need of the Church in North India during the Second World War, he first thought of Varanasi to be the locus for the foundation of the Indian Missionary

Society. It was his conviction that the sacred work of spreading the light of Christ in North India must be associated with the religious capital of India, i.e., Varanasi then known as Benares. The Lord fulfilled his dream by planting the Society in Varanasi itself. Despite the many storms of uncertainty that shook the foundations of the Society, the Indian Missionary Society today is comfortably established here with its generalate, one of the provincialates and six centers in the vicinity of Varanasi city.

Matridham Ashram

One of the vibrant centers of the Varanasi province of the IMS is Matridham Ashram, the cradle of Khrist Bhakta Movement. One cannot easily miss this 'Tapovan' that stands out on Varanasi-Sindhora road, with tall green trees giving cool breeze of *santhi* to all the passers-by. It was Rev. Msgr. Jose A.E. Fernandez, the then Superior General of the Society, who bought this plot of land in 1954 and named it Matridham Ashram. 'Matridham' means the 'abode of the Mother'. The Ashram is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Ashrams have a significant role in the transformation of Indian society. Varanasi has countless Hindu-ashrams, and the IMS pursues an ashram-life style as a powerful means of Christian presence here. Today Matridham is one of the most known spirituality cum evangelization centers of North India.

Although efforts in the direction of *sharing* the Christian faith had been made many times in the Ashram from the very beginning of its existence it was in the early nineties that serious steps were taken towards the sharing of the 'Word of God'. It started with *satsanghs* organized on all Sundays. It was in the form of a two hour-long prayer meeting and was attended by a few people from neighbouring villages. From November 1993 to September 1994 the Ashram held night-vigils on all second Saturdays. In September 1994 we started regular monthly day-long-*satsanghs*. The movement has now spread across Varanasi, Allahabad, Azamgad, Jaunpur, Gahzipur, Ballia, Badohim, Mirzapur, Chandauli (districts of U.P) Bhabua, Mohania,, Bhojpur, Rohtas and Patna (districts of Bihar). This movement has a following of around 25000 to 30000 people and is growing day by day. It has already out-numbered the Catholic population of the diocese of

Varanasi. At present, in the weekly *satsanghs* (Gospel discourse and healing service) held on every Sunday around 4000 people participate; in the monthly *satsangh* of every second Saturday around seven to eight thousand people come from far and wide to attend the daylong preaching of the Word and for the healing service. Some even take the trouble of walking many miles, seeking God's mercy. These devotees are now called 'Khrist Bhaktas' (devotees of Christ).

Khrist Bhaktas

The *satsanghs* made a breakthrough. They gave birth to a Christian devotional movement among the rural non-Christian folks. The ashram conducts a monthly *satsangh* (preaching of the Word and healing prayer) on second Saturdays, which is attended by a few thousands of people from far and wide, as far as 150 kilometers. Besides this we have weekly *satsanghs* on Sundays, which too has a large crowd. The most important component of a *satsang* is the sharing of the Word of God. Word of God is shared in an effective manner taking the peoples' context into account without diluting the Word. The Good News addresses peoples' problems and brings consolation in their struggles. Singing and praise and worship have an important place in *satsanghs*. People are taught to thank and praise God for their struggles and pains, and look at these experiences from a faith-point of view. The paschal mystery is presented to people as God's response to our cries. The presence and working of the Holy Spirit is powerfully felt in the *satsanghs* through healing, liberation from fear and conversion of heart.

It is a joy to see people of all castes and creeds entering the Ashram premises with deep faith and the conviction that Jesus the Sadguru (True Teacher / Mediator) will give them 'darshan' (vision). During the *satsanghs*, by the power of the Word of God preached in a simple manner and in a simple language, people experience the love of God enveloping them. They return home singing God's praises, assured by the Word of God and by Christ's love, which they had not heard or experienced in the past.

The 'Darshan Bhavan' where perpetual adoration goes on is central to the ministry of sharing of faith in the ashram. It is a

powerhouse and attracts hundreds of people. Throughout the day the staff lead prayers in a powerful manner, which is attended by quite many people, the sick and suffering. People also bring the sick and take them to the 'Santvana room' meant for the sick while their relatives and guardians earnestly engage in prayer in the Darshan Bhavan. Hundreds of people are healed there. Besides, one or two of the staff are always available in the ashram premise to counsel the sick and the troubled.

Every month a residential retreat for the faith formation of the Khrist Bhaktas is held in the Ashram. It is here that the Khrist Bhaktas are given solid teachings on the faith contents. An average of 250 people attend it every month.

The Village Communities and the Aguas

Most of the Bhaktas in the villages gather around the 'Aguas' (elders) for common prayers and breaking of the Word, with a spiritual fervor resembling that of early Christian communities. The Aguas are leaders who are formed from within the village community, based on their charisma, Spirit-filled and exemplary life. The Ashram community recognizes them as leaders. It is the duty of these Aguas to animate the small groups in the villages and lead them to prayer. The Aguas are voluntary workers of the Gospel. They are gathered in the Ashram once in every week for prayers and once in two months for a two-day spiritual boosting programme in order to train them to animate the village communities. Under the leadership of the Aguas, the Bhaktas imbibe the spirit of Christian living in an exemplary manner. It challenges the existing Christian groups, which often look up to the parishes and mission stations for all material needs of theirs.

Sensitive to the Ashram Values of India

The prayerful atmosphere in the ashram helps people to have an attitude of reverence and piety towards God present there. The faith of the Khrist Bhaktas is witnessed in their reverence towards the sacredness of the Mandir (chapel) of Jesus. The commitment, teamwork, single-mindedness and whole-heartedness of the ashram staff (comprising of priests, laity and religious) and their openness and availability to the Bhaktas add to the strength of the ministry.

Inculturation is the aspect of the approach that makes everything different in Matridham Ashram. The long-cherished values, signs and symbols of India, are incorporated in the Ashram. Values like openness, hospitality, simplicity, availability, harmony and silence are some of the essential qualities to be found in any ashram. Strictly vegetarian food, simplicity of life and inculturation in all aspects of life make the Ashram accessible to the seekers from all religions; they hardly feel threatened culturally or religiously in the ashram premise. Matridham Ashram is an open house for all. The entire community whole-heartedly welcomes all people of goodwill be they religious, priests, Bishops, laity, people of any faith, poor, rich or sick. All find a welcome place in the Ashram.

Media Programmes

The Ashram uses quite a lot of audio-visual materials. Books are a powerful medium for carrying faith to the Khrist bhaktas. Half a dozen books are printed and published by the ashram, which serve to be powerful tools for evangelization and faith formation. Audio, videocassettes and CDs of talks and bhajans are other useful tools. Almost every family has these cassettes. They listen to them again and again with much devotion. Another tool is the magazine named 'Vachan Sudha, today known as 'Prabhu ne Kaha'. From 1994 this bimonthly has been published by the Ashram. It has wide circulation and is a means for the Ashram to be in constant touch with the Khrist Bhaktas.

From August 15th 2007 we have been giving a half an hour programme daily on a cable channel in Ranchi every evening. The result was quite exciting. Ranchi being the capital of Jharkhand, a North Indian state, and perhaps the largest Christian pocket of the North, the programme made a remarkable impact. Thousands of our Catholics started listening to the Word of God through it. There was tremendous conversion of lives and increase of family prayer. Seeing the above impact we went for a satellite channel, Sadhana. And now through the intervention of God we got a better channel which is available almost everywhere i.e., Zee Jagaran. The programme entitled *Nutan Dhara* (new spring) consisting of biblical talks, skits and songs is becoming more and more popular and bringing

many to the Lord. It also has become a powerful means of the faith-renewal of the Khrist Bhaktas.

Ashray, a Center for the Mentally Afflicted

The Khrist Bhaktas have been bringing many mentally sick people for healing to the Ashram. Quite a few have been healed through prayer. However, perceiving the need for a separate apartment and medical care for them we have opened a small center for the mentally afflicted in the campus. The center is showing splendid results and many are healed partially or fully and rehabilitated in their homes. Today Ashray has become another means of sharing the Gospel.

Common Celebrations

One of the reasons for the vivacity of this movement is the lenten celebrations by the Khrist Bhakta community in the Ashram. The lenten season is very holy and important for the Khrist Bhaktas. The mortification and asceticism during the lenten observances give them the satisfaction of a strong spiritual experience. The passion narratives, enacted through folk media in the line of the Ramlila celebrations in the Holy Week acquaint them with the life of Christ and it addresses directly to the struggles and crises of their lives.

During the lenten season, thousands of them keep strict fasting for forty days in order to prepare themselves to participate in the celebrations of Good Friday and Easter. On Good Friday, an enormous crowd comes to the Ashram to take part in the way of the cross, and to touch and venerate the cross. The lenten celebrations are a favorite to the Bhaktas, probably because, the suffering and cross of Jesus give more meaning to the suffering that they have in their daily living. Easter becomes the culmination of the celebrations. Almost an equal number of Bhaktas participate in the Easter vigil. It is too elevating to see thousands of Bhaktas with lighted candles singing *alleluia* to the Risen Lord. For us Easter vigil is not a ritual but a profound experience. Making the blessed water available to these thousands of Bhaktas is a hard job. Blessed water is kept in many places. Barricades are made in order to control the crowds. They carry with reverence this holy water and preserve it in their homes for the whole year. Only in necessary cases this water is used as a means for healing. They

also send this water to their relatives far and wide. The significance of holy water in their homes is important on the background of the heritage of keeping Ganga Water in every Hindu home.

The Christmas Celebrations in the Ashram have been quite elaborate and long. The first Christmas celebrations by the Khrist Bhaktas were held on Dec 24th night in 1993. 60 Khrist Bhaktas participated in it. From then on every year the number of Khrist Bhaktas for Christmas celebrations increased. Today more than 10,000 of them gather for the celebration of Christmas. The celebration lasts from 4 pm on 24th to 6.30 on 25th. A two hour-long Christmas play presented by Prerna Kala Manch professionally gives solid insights into the various aspects of Christmas. Thereafter we have a long Eucharistic celebration and a film show on Biblical themes, devotional folk songs etc. With these the whole congregation is kept awake till morning.

The three day long annual satsangh begins with an inter-religious prayer meeting: more than 3000 people reside here during the satsangh while many others come daily. Normally preachers are invited from outside and a number of healings and conversion of lives take place during the satsangh.

On the day of Guru Purnima when most Hindus visit their ashrams and Gurus the Khrist Bhaktas like to be in Matridham Ashram paying their obeisance to their Satguru Jesus. More than 1000 people came for the satsangh on the day which focuses on Jesus the Satguru. At the end the Bhaktas are given a printed Guru mantra (Word of God) and prasad.

The Spiritual Experiences of the Krist-bhaktas

The experience of expressive praying, especially in community – which is not in the mainstream of Hindu religious tradition – is a new experience which gives them a sense of freedom and contentment. They experience the freedom of relationship with the divine Father who unconditionally loves them. The Word of God is addressed to them in a simple language related to their own life situation. The Word challenges them. “Indeed, the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from

spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). The experience of praying in freedom, expressing their whole being, and listening to the Word of God, which directly addresses them in their life situation help them face the reality of life.

The Bhaktas have different levels of experience of Christ. For the beginners Jesus is a Baba, (a divine person) who can respond to their needs. Some have a particular attributive experience of Jesus - mercy, healing power, personal appeal etc. There are many who have a deep experience of the person of Jesus and some become the 'Aguas' (leaders) who in turn lead others to the Lord. Initially it is suffering that brings them to the ashram. Eventually they exclaim as Andrew exclaimed: "We have found the Messiah" (Joh. 1, 41). Their experience of the Messiah is quite personal and very deep. He becomes their life partner, their Master, their Redeemer.

With the help of shared prayers and breaking of the Word of God the Bhaktas ascent to higher realms of devotion and they experience not only healing from various physical ailments, no matter how terrible and old they may be, but also inner healing, freedom from psychological bondages especially those that happen due to socio-creedal discrimination and oppression. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according o the riches of his grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and insight "(Eph 1:7-8; Col. 1:13-14). Consequently, they are freed from various superstitions and bondages, and they experience peace in their lives and in their families.

With a changed attitude towards life and the world, these people otherwise divided by caste barriers and social taboos, come out in freedom to relate and communicate with others, even with people of other castes and creed and find a sense of equality before God. The experience of fellowship and communion with one another gives more joy and meaning to their lives. It is visibly seen that barriers of caste that kept them away from one another is being removed here. What a social liberation!

Features of this Movement

Krist Bhakta Movement: A peoples' movement for spiritual

liberation leading to a genuine conversion of lives and transformation of society.

Touched and transformed by the Gospel they have emerged as a vibrant community of devotees of Christ (Khrisť Bhaktas) even making great impact on the age old Christians.

Strengthened by the Spirit of God they earnestly strive to live the Good News in their personal and social life.

Cherishing their own cultural and social identity they try to embody the Kingdom of God.

The movement is the result of the Satsangs held in the Ashram from 1993-1994.

What brings them to the Ashram is suffering but what they draw from this 'Pool' of blessings is a new, well-founded identity as children of the loving, forgiving, caring Father in heaven.

This new identity gives them a new culture: a culture of faith, prayer and brotherhood.

Above all, we must accept that this movement is a work of the Holy Spirit. "When you send forth your Spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground" (Ps 104:30). The base of the Krist Bhakta movement, devotion to the Lord, leads the people to a deep experience of freedom. In deep self-giving, without fear or shame, one achieves a complete freedom of being and thus begins to be animated by the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit gives them wisdom and strength to pursue the path of devotion to the Lord, in spite of many hurdles.

Secondly, in appreciation of the values of the Lord, the devotees gradually achieve a certain conformity with the Lord (cf. Gal 4:19), and start to live out his values:

"Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy spirit" (*Evangelii Nunciandi*). No doubt such a large and powerful movement can be initiated, strengthened and led by the Holy Spirit alone.

Although Matridham ashram guides animate the movement it is mostly a laity-based work as it spreads through the laity and is guided

by the laity unlike the traditional approach wherein it is the religious and priests and paid catechists who engage themselves in the formation of the faithful. Here we have a different dynamics. The ashram staff seldom visits villages. It is the people who come to the Ashram rather than we go to villages to invite them. The *aguas* become the first bridge between us and the people. Normally *aguas* are those who visited the ashram first and experienced the touch of the Lord and who in turn have become the messengers.

Khrst Bhakta movement has hardly any structure nor do we intend to have any. There is great freedom in their expressions of faith, bhakti and loyalty to the Lord. They come to the Ashram for Satsanghs and prayer not by force but by inspiration. The movement is not organized although there is a natural spontaneity as well as discipline in it.

Future of the Krist Bhakta Movement

One of the concerns of many churchmen and women concerning this movement has been about its future. How long will/should these believers remain devotees? Should they not embrace Christ fully and enter into the sacramental life of the Church? We have no answer to these questions. We are open to the Holy Spirit. However, we are not in a hurry. Can we think of a Church without walls and structures, a Church that is a Spirit-generated movement than an institutionalized religion? Can this be another possibility, *a new way of being Church*, especially in today's religio-political situation of this part of India? We don't know. We are open to the Lord's promptings, to the movements of the Spirit. For the present we would say as Paul says, "Christ did not send me to baptize. He sent me to tell the Good News (I Cor. 1:17)."

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